JAPANESE TEMP WORKERS:
THE CULTURE AND POLITICS OF PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

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This dissertation examines the particular ways in which the Japanese employment system is becoming insecure, and how workers negotiate the emerging forms of precarious employment. I use the case of blue collar temporary agency workers to analyze the patterns of insecure workers’ responses to precarious employment arrangements, both in their individual and collective forms. During eighteen months in the field from April 2008 to September 2009, I gathered ethnographic data on temp workers by working on an assembly line for five weeks. To examine the collective forms of worker responses, I joined a labor union in Tokyo and studied street demonstrations, collective bargaining negotiations, and struggles in court. A total of fifty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with temp workers, temp agency managers, corporate executives, permanent workers, and labor union officers.

The predominant form of worker agency at the individual level is diligence and commitment. Temp workers work very hard, involving their psyche in finding ways to work faster and mindfully aiming for high quality output. I revisit the Marxist question of surplus appropriation, why do temp workers work as hard as they do when management rewards so little? In response to the conventional answers of “coercion” and “consent,” I borrow Bourdieu’s concepts of practical sense and illusio to show how they become absorbed in perfecting their jobs as they manage the particular deprivations arising from factory temp work. However, their passion and commitment generated emotional suffering because of the discriminatory treatment they continued to receive.
In analyzing the collective forms of worker agency, I introduce the concept of “advocacy without constituency” to examine how particular types of Japanese labor unions called general unions and community unions make relatively small efforts to organize the temp workers while spending much of their resources on rallying, lobbying, and waging court struggles to change labor laws. I show how these small and poor unions compensate for their structural weaknesses by networking with other organizations, at times crossing the historical fissures that exist within the left.
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INTRODUCTION

On a cloudy day in April 2009, I was chatting over lunch with Higa, who had been living as a factory temp worker for the last twelve years and was now struggling to secure work after being released by an electronics factory the previous month. The subsidiary of an electronics giant had suffered from the global financial recession in 2008 and had released the temp workers they had been using. Higa was about to lose housing as well, since the dormitory that was provided by the temp agency was going to be taken away along with the job he had just lost. After accompanying him to the Ueno Public Employment Office to clear the complications that arose in claiming unemployment insurance, we went to a small restaurant for lunch. We were also eager to leave behind the uneasy, depressed air that permeates a Japanese public employment service office.

Higa, a soft-spoken man in his late forties, was munching on his food when I asked if he had heard of a writer named Akagi Tomohiro and the article he had written for the monthly journal *Ronza*, published by the Asahi newspaper. The article was published about two years earlier, in January 2007. Akagi’s worldview as a not-so-young freeter aroused a fair amount of media coverage, with intellectuals and critics responding to his statements. The article had made Akagi a well-known writer. His article was titled, “I Want to Slap ’Maruyama Masao.’ A freeter, 31 years old. My hope: War.”

Higa: No, I don’t know. Who is he?

I explained to Higa about Akagi. He is a freelance writer and posts statements on his blog on freeter and other social concerns. I paraphrased the gist of the assumptions
and claims he made in his controversially acclaimed article. Akagi is anxious, frustrated, and angry about living a life of unbearable humiliation. He is past the age of 30 and still lives with his parents, whom he does not get along with. He wants to rent his own apartment, but such liberty is beyond reach with the odd jobs he works as a freeter. While stopping by a local shopping center on a Sunday morning after his night shift, he sees men of his age spending a happy, peaceful weekend with their families. He sees the reality he lives in stark contrast, coming home in the morning after an eight-hour night shift, spending some time surfing the internet with some alcohol before going to bed, only to wake up in the late afternoon to repeat the life he is ashamed of. He is conscious of the societal view towards him; men working nonstandard jobs are the sore losers who have no one else to blame for their fate but themselves. They are the scum of society who contribute to lowering the GDP if they have anything to do with society at all. Society whips him to get up and go find a regular job, and blames him for lack of effort or incompetence when he cannot. But Akagi questions, where are the good jobs, and who gets them? He fears the real likelihood that his present life is set for good. What is worse is that even his current status quo could be jeopardized when his parents retire and pass away. Although such a confession of life as seen from the standpoint of a nonstandard worker is painful, the story is not uncommon and unfortunately is not enough to cause commotion in the press.

The trigger for debate came when Akagi expressed his wish for war. Quoting the definition of peace as “a quiet and still condition,” he claimed that he does not wish for a peaceful society if it means a situation in which the present continues and persists without change. He claimed that the present Japanese society is a society that locks the younger
generation into living an insecure life in the shadows of the successful—those with a permanent job, and hence with a secure income, wife, children, home, and honor. What Akagi desired was a tremendous force that would shake and break this rigid structure of contemporary Japanese society. He directed his anger against the now old “new left” generation whose unions have successfully secured their interests, protecting their own jobs by imposing the burden of economic stagnation on the younger generation. Akagi claimed that war is only tragic for those with important things to lose; for people like him, war is rather an opportunity that will liquefy the inequality gridlock. In a society where there is a sharp division between the “haves” and “have-nots,” without mobility between them due to the capacity of the haves to protect their own interests, war is no longer a taboo. Which condition is better? A peaceful society in which a handful of the dispossessed face a life of humiliation they never chose for themselves, or a condition of war in which everyone equally faces the gamble of life? Akagi advocated for the latter (Akagi 2007).

Such a worldview surprised me when I read the article. He surely disappointed the left-leaning critics for advocating apocalypse over popular protest. He was also frowned upon by the pacifists who defended the Article 9 peace clause of the Constitution as a hard-won lesson Japanese ought to have learned from the Pacific War. I wondered what Higa thought about some of the claims Akagi made.

To be precise, Higa is not a freeter. Factory temping is not an “arubaito” or part-time job but a full-time job disguised under a triangular employment contract. However, the status of a factory temp worker shares important features with the aging freeters: both groups are relegated into the dark pit of Japanese society. Their source of suffering
lies in their slim hopes for securing a good stable job that pays enough to live a life they value. The issue at its core is the restricted freedom they enjoy to shape their lives into something positive that they would find worth living for (Sen 1999). Their hopes for a better life get even slimmer as they age. The root cause of their suffering functions like a chain reaction, producing more suffering, such as the cultural pain of trying to win recognition and honor as a respectable, full-fledged member of Japanese society. In addition, these men with insecure jobs and low pay have a hard time finding marriage partners. In patriarchal Japanese society, women are significantly underpaid compared to men, based on the ascribed domestic role women play in the family after marriage (Brinton 1992). For women living in such a society, men’s jobs and income become a significant factor in choosing a marriage partner (Iwao 1998:70). Finally, if the progression of time (i.e., aging) after a certain point in life is about diminishing chances for joyous surprises, and thus the picture of one’s future becomes as visible as images developing on photographic paper, life becomes fearful for these workers. I wanted to hear Higa’s thoughts on the issues of living with an underpaid, insecure job, and the solution Akagi posed to the problems. I noticed Higa already nodding along as I spoke, and when I was done, he said, “Yeah, I understand what he means. I feel for him.”

We went on to finish our meal silently and then stepped out of the busy restaurant. Out on the street, we continued the conversation while walking towards the train station. I asked Higa what he meant by “I understand.” Higa, who appeared to be thinking to himself about Akagi’s claims, elaborated:

Higa: I have not experienced war myself, but I am from Okinawa. I have a sense of what war is like…So I don’t literally hope for war. But, this society lacks compassion, if I can put it that way… Everyone only cares for
themselves… People are so ready to screw each other and intent on climbing up the ladder. And people appear to be okay with it. There is no sense of community, of mutual help. People who are born at the bottom of society have a hard time climbing up… Sure, there are some who make it. It’s not impossible. But it is almost impossible. For most people, there is no exit. No matter how hard you work, you’re stuck. And rich people care to keep their wealth but not to look out for others.

Kojima: Hmm.
Higa: Current society is so bad… War might be the only thing that can change this society from its very root, to reset the way our society has become.

Kojima: Voting, or street demonstrations won’t do?
Higa: No, that’s not going to change much.

This conversation with Higa was one of the most memorable exchanges I had with the people I met during my field work. Standing on a narrow street corner in Ueno, Higa spoke heatedly, which was unusual given his taciturn, calm demeanor. I remember it because this confession came from a hard-working man who never missed work (according to his temp agency manager whom I later interviewed), who had been hopping factories as a temporary worker for the past ten years, who continued to try to keep up his spirits and remain positive about landing the next job, who sent part of his meager income to his elderly single mother back home in Okinawa, who purchased milk as the most significantly nutritious staple food he consumed, who wished for a family but had lost hopes for it. Higa’s conversation illuminates at least three points worthy of attention, which this research will pursue.

First is the process of emergence of a group of men and women like Higa who suffer from precarious employment. How did they come to exist? Higa works under the employment arrangement called temporary agency work, defined by its triangular employment relationship in which the temporary agency is the de jure employer while the worker is dispatched to work under the direction and supervision of the client company. Temporary agency work is symbolic of the emergence of flexible employment in
Japanese society. As we shall see in detail later, the employment fits the characteristics of a “bad job” (Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson 2000) with job insecurity, low pay, and limited benefits. How did the system that gave birth to workers like Higa come to exist? Usage of third party labor by a corporation that is not legally responsible as an employer was banned in the Employment Security Act enacted in 1947. However, with the Worker Dispatching Act enacted in 1986, for-profit human resource business was legalized, and through a series of deregulations of the Act in the following two decades, Japanese society saw the state-endorsed birth and growth of precarious workers like Higa, who work full-time but live a life in poverty without seeing a way out. I analyze the historical emergence of the Worker Dispatching Act, and specifically look into the way the pressure to decrease the cost of production under increased global competition was filtered by local institutions, giving temporary agency work its specific shape in Japanese society. I also take the standpoint of the job seekers to examine bottom-up how job seekers come to choose temp work among the limited choices they have in the restricted job market.

Second, Higa drew a picture of contemporary Japanese society as a fiercely competitive, dog-eat-dog society. He lamented on the individualism pervading society where he sees no community that values or practices mutual help. People have their hands full with their respective daily struggles to build and maintain their own lives. In this rat-race society in which the disadvantaged remain disadvantaged, making effort is futile. Higa bears a painful sense of being stuck in a deadlock, shared with Akagi, because they both know they cannot win the competition. Upward mobility is unreal for them. However, in my research on the case of factory temp workers in contemporary
Japan, I show that these precarious workers do not live their daily lives chronically suffering from pessimism, with their minds dominated by defeatism, hopelessly waiting for a catastrophe to bring change to their lives. Rather, closer observation and inquiry into their everyday lives shows that they are more engaged. Temp workers’ daily micro-worlds are about actively and creatively seeking ways to make their lives positive and meaningful. These temp workers practice agency in identifying areas of life over which they have autonomy and control. They devise ways to attain personal growth and improvement in their work lives, and hence experience joy in what they do. This dissertation thus examines the nature of the daily lived experiences of factory temp workers. What kind of understandings of life, work and society do they develop as they live out their lives? How do these temp workers find meaning in their lives and survive on a daily basis? My research sheds light on the specific ways in which these temp workers respond to the employment arrangement.

Third, Higa held little faith in the institutionalized means for social change, such as through voting or street politics. Unionization and social movements have been advocated by many philosophers and academics as the hope of the future and as viable means to counter the negative consequences of neoliberal reforms. However, it is also typically the case that powerlessness and a sense of resignation pervade those who are suffering from insecure employment. Temp workers predominantly lead a life distant from collective struggles. Many struggle alone, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters. I examine how individual modes of struggles are linked to collective forms of struggle, and analyze how individual, atomized temp workers come into contact with labor unions and engage in collective struggles. Using the case of the mass dismissal of
factory temp workers that occurred in the context of the global financial recession of 2008, I examine the collective responses by workers to precarious employment.

**Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Flexible Employment**

Many industrialized countries are seeing an increase in nonstandard workers who are subject to precarious employment relations that are typically associated with job insecurity, low pay, and a weak benefits package (Barbieri and Scherer 2009; Giesecke and Grob 2004; Imai and Sato 2011; Kalleberg 2000, 2009; Shin 2010). Corporations are under the legal mandate to maximize shareholder profit. As Bakan (2004) showed using interviews with corporate executives, business gurus, and the world’s leading economists, corporations exist to make a profit, and some find it immoral to limit corporate freedom to do so by regulating the flexible usage of external labor. In the context of increased global competition, cutting production costs and maintaining the capacity to flexibly respond to changes in the economy have become ever more important in running businesses successfully. However, the corporate effort to raise profit by increasing the use of nonstandard workers means life insecurity from the workers’ standpoint. Abundant studies demonstrate the negative impact of nonstandard employment relationships on workers who live it, such as adverse health effects (Virtanen et al. 2005), exclusion from social safety nets (Yuasa 2008), wage inequality and unemployment risk (Giesecke 2009), and the emergence of the full-time “working poor” (NHK Supesharu Wâkingupua Shuzaihan 2007), all succinctly framed by Bourdieu (1998) as the “structural violence” (p. 98) of neoliberalism.
According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is both a set of economic policies and a cultural doctrine that attempts to revive and expand the national economy by liberating individual and corporate entrepreneurial freedom. An individual’s freedom of action, speech, and choice are a fundamental good. These rights are sanctities that should be preserved. The same goes for the freedom of businesses and corporations as “legal individuals.” Free markets and free trade are necessary conditions in which these freedoms can flourish. Moreover, free markets lead to economic development and improvement of individual well-being. The state’s role is to actively create and maintain the economic and legal arrangements that guarantee free market transactions. The state’s role is to create markets where they do not exist, and to deregulate existing barriers that interfere with open competition. Under such arrangements in which the freedom of individuals and corporations to exert their ability in the market is guaranteed, these subjects accumulate unprecedented wealth from successfully seizing opportunities, while those who fail are held accountable personally for their failings as lacking ability. When the state withdraws from social welfare provisions and individuals are left on their own to secure their own well-being, they are ushered into an atomized race for the commodification of the self through acquisition of marketable human capital.

Under neoliberalism, when the state’s control over corporate power is weakened, disposable workers emerge as prototypical (ibid:169). Corporations are competing in an increasingly global arena, which poses both risk and opportunity. One of the significant ways in which corporations attempt to avoid risk and maximize opportunity is by maintaining a flexible, short-term framework. Corporations seek to close unprofitable branches quickly and release workers, while simultaneously hiring new workers to
expand business in thriving areas. Free mobility of capital is a key to raising profit. In such a context, long-term commitment is consciously avoided. Corporations maintain the flexible capacity to externalize the risk of doing business globally by replacing permanent employment with temporary contracts. These workers are structurally made to shoulder the risk when corporations shed their liabilities upon them when business turns sour. Hence, neoliberalism together with globalization is a force both seductive and alienating. In analyzing such changing institutions that no longer provide a long-term frame, Sennett (2006) argues that such emerging structures of capitalism “have not set people free” (13). The structural changes have pushed individuals into living a fragmented, unstable life. The skilled worker must acquire the disposition to let go of the past and continuously seek the new. Casualization of the labor force through the use of nonstandard workers is an inseparable part of the new capitalism, and an exemplary form of such disposable workforce that emerges as prototypical is temporary agency work.

**Changes in the Japanese Labor Market**

The Japanese employment system has historically been characterized by lifetime employment and a seniority-based wage system, in which employment is guaranteed until retirement, and raises and promotions are assured based on seniority. These two pillars of the employment system existed in nascent form in the early twentieth century, but were developed and institutionalized during the rapid economic development of the postwar era. The state actively participated in promoting industrial development (Johnson 1982), while the firms’ responsibility in exchange for state protection was to provide stable employment, which was to lead to the creation of a stable, growing society (Schaede
The judiciary also played an active role in drafting this postwar social contract by creating legal standards that made it extremely difficult for corporations to discharge their standard workers (Foote 1996). Labor also took an active part in institutionalizing these securities by developing cordial, cooperative ties with the management (Gordon 1998; Imai 2011; Cole 1971). In this manner, the state, business, court, and labor together created a system where the Japanese norm of employment was institutionalized in the form of job security and wage security. These two securities on the other hand served to secure workers’ motivation and loyalty to the company (Cole 1971, 1979; Schaede 2008). Hence, during the period of rapid economic development, the nation was abiding by a specific social contract in which the state led economic development by strategically supporting particular industries. In return for such state support, corporations offered secure, long-term employment, and employees committed themselves to the growth of the company in exchange for the securities the company offered to them and their families. Meanwhile, the court also helped create these employment norms through their judgments.

Some call such economic growth with relatively little inequality growth with equity (Mok 2011). However, inequality did exist in the Japanese world of work, in its own particular shape. If the permanent employment system, seniority-based wage, and union protection were the underlying structures that enabled growth with equity, there were segments of the population that did not enjoy these security structures. One group of workers was employees of small to mid-sized corporations (Imai and Sato 2011). While these workers may have been hired as permanent employees, small to mid-sized corporations were more susceptible to swings of the economy and went bankrupt more
frequently than did large corporations. It took corporate strength and stamina to maintain a workforce during economically difficult times, which depended a lot on corporate size. Hence, employees of small to mid-size corporations were permanent workers only to the extent that the company stayed financially afloat.

I had a chance to interview Uchimura, a CEO of a middle-size, technology-intensive metal-plating company in Tokyo. He recollected during the interview the period when his corporation had to reduce its workforce. While he was proud his company was producing high-end products that made it to space on the NASA Space Shuttle, its corporate stamina was not enough to survive the Dot-com bubble burst in the early 2000s. Wages of the management were reduced to zero. Working hours were diminished through shutdowns. Job transfers and rotations were implemented. The company had solicited voluntary early retirement. However, the corporation could not survive unless the company released its workers. It was then that he tearfully had to let go of his employees, whom he knew well along with their families. He stated, “I never want to be in a position where I have to undergo the same experience again.” Since then, he has made conscious efforts to raise the capital ratio so the company will have room to maintain its workforce during recessions.

Another group of workers who did not enjoy job and wage security were women. As noted earlier, Japan remains a patriarchal society, which is manifest in how women are treated at work. The three securities as practiced in Japan took the form of the so-called “male-breadwinner” model. The employment relationship for women was a reflection of women’s ascribed role in the family. Women’s life course as deemed appropriate and morally correct by Japanese society was to work after schooling for
several years until marriage and then become a “good wife, wise mother,” i.e., to play the supporting role for the full-time working husband and be a good mother by quitting the job and staying at home to take care of the children. Women’s employment was considered to be only temporary and supplementary, whereas fulfilling household responsibilities were deemed to be of permanent, primary significance. Under such hegemony, women’s employment was typically insecure and underpaid compared to men. At large companies, many women used to be hired for “pink-collar” jobs (now replaced by agency temporaries). Women who re-enter the workforce after child-rearing are often hired as “pūto (part-time)” workers who may work full-time yet are paid by the hour without job security or benefits such as seasonal bonus payments. Whereas such usage of female workers as flexible workers arose in response to the 1970s oil crises, the usage of women as a peripheral workforce is now becoming a permanent part of the Japanese employment system (see Gottfried and Hayashi 1998).

The postwar social contract emerging out of the nation-wide project for economic development came under pressure as global competition intensified together with the decade-long recession during the 1990s. Before then, corporations chiefly responded to market fluctuations by reducing work hours, rotating jobs, and farming out workers to subsidiary companies in the case of men, and by asking female workers to quit (which it still does to a greater extent than neighboring countries; see Jung and Cheon 2006). As noted above, job insecurity mainly existed among part-timers who were mostly women, and also among employees of small to mid-sized corporations that lacked the resources to maintain employment during financially difficult times. However, in response to the prolonged economic stagnation, a new managerial thesis was drafted by the employers’
association in 1995 titled “The Japanese Way of Management under the New Era.” This new blueprint limited job and wage securities to selected core workers while making explicit use of an external labor force to be managed under the logic of just-in-time labor flexibility. Lincoln and Tanaka (1997) demonstrate how large Japanese firms such as Toyota and Sanyo increasingly came to appreciate the utility of temporary labor as a “buffer” to protect permanent workers from market fluctuations.

Nonstandard workers had been increasing prior to the 1990s as the nation began to shift towards post-industrial economy with the expansion of the service sector. However, the Worker Dispatching Act revised in 1999 and 2004 introduced a new group of precarious workers into the Japanese labor market by liberalizing the use of agency temporaries for non-skilled routine labor. Instead of a complete overhaul of the Japanese employment structure, these laws preserved the values and institutions of security for the permanent workers while adding a new stratum of insecure workers to the Japanese labor market. To put it differently, flexible employment was introduced among the young entrants of the labor market to protect the employment of the middle-aged permanent workers (Genda 2001). This limited, partial deregulation resulted in the emergence of a segmented, dual labor market constituted of a protected core and an insecure periphery, where one of the lines of inequality in Japan is distinctively drawn between permanent workers and nonstandard workers (Sato 2009; Imai and Sato 2011; Taromaru 2009).

**Filling the Gap in the Study of Blue Collar Workers in Japan**

Previous studies on the Japanese working class have focused on directly hired, permanent workers. Cole (1971) spent four months at two factories to examine the
Japanese factory workers’ everyday life world and behaviors, and studied how the permanent employment system and the seniority-based promotion system played out at the two factories. He argued that while there were differences in the ways these two systems were accepted and interpreted by the factory workers, seniority-based pay and promotion, together with the accompanied assumption of permanent employment, led the blue collar workers to view their jobs as a career that provided work incentives and commitment. This is in contrast to American blue collar workers whose upward mobility chances are limited (ibid:103-104). Cole also discusses cultural traditions unique to Japan that shape Japanese workers’ behaviors. For one, he uses the term “semi-closed corporate group” to characterize how Japanese workers draw a boundary based on corporate membership rather than one’s job or position within it, agreeing with Vogel, who argued that the basic cleavage in Japanese society exists not among social classes but between corporate groups (ibid:13). Cole argued that the development of an attachment to corporate membership shaped the workers’ commitment, which was mediated by other Japanese cultural mores such as “giri” and “on” that were the subordinates’ way of paying back to the powerful subject based on a paternalistic, affective, and reciprocal social relationship. However, these institutional and cultural mechanisms that tease out cooperation and commitment were all premised on a stable career pattern. Temporary employees in his study were treated as exceptions to the rule; they shared different assumptions characterized by low wages, unskilled work, low employment security, and lack of union protection (ibid:145).

Dore’s study (1973) compared two cases of British and Japanese electric companies to identify the differences between British and Japanese industrial relations...
and where these differences came from. He used the word “welfare corporatism” to describe the industrial relation characteristic of Japan, which is akin to a community in which the employees live the corporate culture, identify with company goals, remain loyal, and devote themselves to the company’s interest. Japanese industrial relations are characterized as “lifetime employment, a seniority-plus-merit wage system, an intra-enterprise career system, enterprise training, enterprise unions,…enterprise welfare, and the careful nurturing of enterprise consciousness, are all of one piece; they fit together” (ibid:264), whereas British firms are characterized by contrasting features, which include mobility of employment, a market-based wage, mobile workers, industrial or craft unions, and state welfare (ibid). Again, similar to Cole’s study, the mutually complementing institutions taken together form a community that shapes the workers’ loyalty, commitment and identification with the company and excludes the temporary workers.

Roberts (1994) is an exception when it comes to studying the marginalized population working in the Japanese factories. She conducted participant observation in the early 1980s at a textile factory run by a large lingerie manufacturer. She studied how women negotiated the will and necessity to remain on the job and bring home income despite the company’s and the husband’s pressure to leave the job upon marriage. These women were permanently employed, standard workers who worked dead-end manual labor jobs with slim hopes for promotion into managerial positions. Roberts was interested in examining how women managed the dual demands expected of them as permanent employees and women required to take care of the home. Although the work was physically demanding with tough supervision and control, the female workers held positive ideas about the job. They displayed uncompromising work ethic, were loyal to
the company, and were proud of what they did at and for the company (ibid:88, 168). However, it was rather difficult to ascertain exactly how such commitment to work was shaped. Roberts touches upon diverse factors such as the occupational ranks and the level of autonomy on the job, while raising other factors such as bonus payments the women received as incentives and the negative consequences of quitting. However, she does not go deeply into analyzing what exactly shapes the female workers’ commitment to working hard.

From these previous studies, we know that permanent employment, seniority-based wage (and promotion), and enterprise unions are cooperation- and commitment-securing institutions. Nonstandard workers are excluded from these institutions and moreover from these analyses, which leaves us little knowledge about how these workers live out their working lives. How do they live their daily lives on the shop floors? Do they work hard? Or do they tend to be shirkers due to the exclusion from these institutions? What we do not yet know are the nonstandard workers’ responses to the structural changes in the Japanese labor market.

In this dissertation, I demonstrate using ethnographic data that temp workers work very hard, involving their psyche in finding ways to work faster and mindfully aiming for high quality output. The predominant form of worker agency at the individual level is diligence and commitment. This is puzzling since temp workers are excluded from the participation-securing institutions that the permanent employees enjoy. I revisit the Marxist question of surplus appropriation by raising the question, why do temp workers work as hard as they do when management rewards so little for their hard work?
This question of surplus appropriation was first raised by Burawoy (1979), who examined why unionized factory workers in the 1970s U.S. worked as hard as they did. From a Marxist perspective, it was puzzling to see workers actively participate in the intensification of their own exploitation, thus serving the interest of capital. Burawoy offered a subtle processual account that showed how workers transformed the external incentives to production (the piece-rate pay system) into a game of earning cultural and economic rewards. In doing so, he highlighted the creative agency of workers as they negotiated the particular structural conditions that defined their work. This dissertation revisits Burawoy’s question in the context of temporary workers, who exert themselves even in the absence of the material incentives and job security that Burawoy’s workers enjoyed.

**What We Know from Studying Temp Workers in the United States**

There are a few qualitative studies on temp workers in the U.S. that have used participant observation or in-depth interviews. Surprisingly, these ethnographic studies also describe instances where temp workers work hard, displaying diligence and commitment, akin to regular workers in Japanese factories (Gottfried 1991; Henson 1996; McAllister 1998; Padavic 2005; Rogers 2000; Smith 1998). Scholars who have experienced temp work first-hand such as Gottfried (1991) found themselves “working at a fast pace” (p. 708) instead of loafing on the job. Henson’s (1996) interviewees confessed that they requested additional work from their bosses and autonomously kept themselves busy (p. 135). Smith (1998) met a factory temp worker who proudly spoke about working enthusiastically to meet the team’s quota (p. 418). Clerical temps in
Padavic’s study (2005) embodied a loyal work ethic and buried themselves in work despite the awareness of corporations not being loyal to them (p. 124). In short, scholars have puzzled over the mechanism behind temp workers’ accommodation to the interests of capital despite the lack of Fordist remuneration, such as job security, pay raises, and promotions. In other words, scholars studying temp workers have revisited the Marx-infused, classic question of surplus appropriation (Burawoy and Wright 1990) stated by Burawoy (1979) as, “Why do workers work as hard as they do?” (p. xi). Whereas Burawoy raised his question to study permanent employees enjoying job security, union protection, and piece-rate pay, scholars have rephrased the question to study the emerging population of temp workers who nevertheless display similar patterns of participation.

Why Do Temp Workers Work so Hard?

The answers provided so far to this “hard work” puzzle have been “coercion” and “consent.” Coercion literature analyzes the structures unique in triangular employment relations that force workers into submission. The thesis depicts workers’ responses as shaped by management power to render them docile, given the limited alternatives workers have in the tight labor market. The assumption behind this thesis is that workers and capitalists have polarized interests, and that workers grudgingly comply because of their statutory lack of power vis-à-vis the management. While workers do occasionally demonstrate individual disobedience, in the final analysis, workers have no choice but to surrender. The title of McAllister’s (1998) study, “Sisyphus at Work in the Warehouse,” exemplifies this position. The image of temp workers is that of a king from Greek mythology “condemned to push a stone from the bottom to the top of a hill for all
eternity…” (p. 221). The employment arrangement leaves workers powerless to contest exploitation. Gottfried (1991, 1992, 2003) sheds light on the mechanism of surveillance unique to temporary agency work by introducing the concept of “dualistic control.” Temp workers are subject to labor control practiced by two bodies (the temp agency and the user client) at two sites (during the intake process at the temp agency office and at the client’s work site). During the intake process, workers are screened to the taste of user clients and doped with self-help dogma, which functions to turn them into docile subjects. The uncertainty of work assignments leads workers to self-discipline. At the client’s work site, “a fragmented labor process along with technical control keeps the temporary employees working at a fast pace” (Gottfried 1991:709).

The coercion thesis sheds light on the sources of management power over labor and the ways such power is exerted upon individual temp workers. This thesis has its merit in laying out the context in which workers find themselves, i.e. the systematic pressure exerted from the outside-in, founded upon the principle of just-in-time usage of labor. In addition, assembly lines are designed to maximize worker output. Accordingly, these workers suffer gravely on the job, forced to work as hard as the permanent employees against their will for lesser but better-than-nothing rewards. These conditions were reflected in the statement of a fellow temp worker at the auto parts factory I worked at: “The job you do as a temp is meaningless. Simple, peripheral jobs. I’m just in it for the pay.”

However, the coercion thesis falls short in explaining the pattern of worker acquiescence in which temp workers demonstrate sincere passion in the work they do. The thesis depicts temp workers as unhappily being pressed by the pace of the assembly
line, but fails to capture the temp workers who experience a “high” in spontaneously pushing themselves faster than the pace of the line. Nor can this perspective explain why some temp workers experience labor control not as a coercive pressure to submit but as something positive, as inspiring.

Consent literature, borrowing from Burawoy’s (1979) classic study, holds that workers acknowledge their own interest in exerting effort, which is shared by the capitalists (Burawoy and Wright 1990). Workers spontaneously give extra effort, self-disciplining themselves in a search for perceived economic and cultural rewards, thereby consenting to their own exploitation. Coercive pressure is present, but is treated rather as a constant variable. While temp work is believed structurally to lack any source of motivation, workers indeed find value in working hard. Smith (1998, 2001) argues that the usage of temp workers in participative work-teams, sometimes even in responsible positions, leads the workers to take corporate goals positively as their own. Coupled with the coercive pressure for mistake-free performance, workers work hard for the real chance to become a permanent employee. Temp workers also abide by corporate goals because they find the current temp job more gratifying than their previous “McJobs” (Ritzer 2006), and may also construct a positive worker identity by aligning themselves with the prestige of the user client. These incentive factors deepen the workers’ commitment to the company and lead them to exert effort. Padavic (2005) argues on a similar line, that workers commit as a way to construct and maintain a positive identity. Whereas permanent employees are by definition socially honored, temp workers are of low status and thus must somehow win honor. They do so through hard work, because
“their identities and self-respect are tied to the dutiful work performance and ‘good worker’ ideology that characterized the Fordist relationship” (112).

The above consent theses shed light on the motivational factors that inspire workers to commit themselves to work. A job that may look exploitative and alienating to an outside observer may have its own worth for workers living it. The merit of this perspective also lies in its emphasis of workers’ identity and dignity, bridging case studies on temp workers with those by Hodson (2001).

However, the implication of this worldview is that the patterned human practices of hard work are purposive, intended actions for the pursuit of economic and cultural rewards. Accordingly, the meanings work holds for these workers are understood as instrumental means to a given end. The problem here is that there is no room to conceptualize workers’ accommodation of capitalist interest as beyond rational calculation. As Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) states,

To reduce the universe of forms of conduct to mechanical reaction [coercion thesis] or purposive action [consent thesis] is to make it impossible to shed light on all those practices that are reasonable without being the product of a reasoned purpose and, even less, of conscious computation (p. 119-20).

As we have seen above, incentive for Japanese temp workers to work hard is especially weak in international comparative terms. Japanese temp workers are paid significantly less than permanent workers. Japanese corporations, especially large ones, are known to offer generous benefits to their permanent employees, including semi-annual bonus payments, allowances for housing, transportation subsidies, and access to company-affiliated recreational facilities, but these arrangements are corporate membership benefits that have been historically developed to secure loyalty and commitment from the
permanent workers, and statutorily exclude temporary agency workers. In addition, user clients are not loyal to the temp workers in terms maintaining their employment at economically difficult times. Finally, the chances for temporary agency workers to become permanent workers are slim. All in all, temporary agency work in Japan is a particularly “bad job.” The consent thesis is not well suited in explaining why Japanese temporary agency workers work as hard as they do.

This case study attempts to bridge the two lines of debate with Bourdieu’s concepts of practical sense and illusio. In contrast to the views that workers have no choice but to work hard, or find it in their interest to do so, my ethnographic data indicate that hard work is the consequence of nurturing the illusio of factory work. Studies hitherto have conceptualized “interest” in too narrow a fashion and are thus unable to capture the passion, the investment, and the preoccupation in work that is beyond rational interest-seeking calculations. Workers work hard because work has intrinsic value for the worker in a strictly Marxist sense of species-being. Humans see themselves reflected in the work they do. They seek a life of many-sided spontaneous creativity in the labor process and output. On the other hand, labor becomes an immense force that enslaves us when it is degraded to a mere means to obtaining some external ends. Rather than labor being a source of joy, humans come to suffer from such estranged labor. Under such working conditions, workers attempt to make the job un-alienating. They do so by bringing their creativity and individuality into the job, i.e., by turning coerced labor into “an object of will and consciousness” (Marx, 1975:276). Workers make estranged labor intimate by making it a personal engagement. This is the way temp workers try to manage the otherwise unbearably cold world of work governed by rationality and
efficiency and make it something warmer, more human, and hence more livable as a job. I borrow from Bourdieu to call such humanistic, *reasonable* drive, or the *libido* to materialize the *species-life* in an inherently exploitative employment arrangement, the *illusio*, for it is an illusory yet seductive and deeply human response.

**Significance**

This dissertation is a study that responds to the calls made by scholars for a better understanding of how members of this society live out and respond to the emerging neoliberal order. MacDonald and Marsh (2000) point out the insufficient attention given to how marginality in the neoliberal world of work is experienced and responded to by the workers who suffer from it (p. 134). More recently, Kalleberg (2009) pointed out in his 2008 ASA presidential address the necessity to better understand the mechanisms of insecure workers’ agency and its specific forms (p.13-14). Sociologists are interested in the doings of people, because as Marx stated, “Men make history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” Analyzing the people’s conscious daily activities and identifying patterns in them is about witnessing the makings of a society. Agents are causal (Manicas 2006), and the significance of this research is in indentifying the underlying mechanism that is generating the patterned behaviors of those workers who live on “bad jobs.” This research particularly aims at identifying the mechanism behind insecure workers’ commitment and participation in the post-Fordist, neoliberal world of work, which is well
exemplified in the contemporary Japanese economy in comparison with its international counterparts.

**Methods and Data**

“Dance,” said the Sheep Man. “You gotta dance. As long as the music plays…”

Murakami Haruki, *Dance Dance Dance*.

I spent eighteen months in Tokyo and the suburban eastern region of Japan from April 2008 to September 2009. It was a rather long journey, spotted with colorful events that still make me jubilant when I think of them, yet indented with experiences that led me to despair. As I came to see what my dissertation fieldwork was coming to be, the words of Murakami Haruki’s “Sheep Man” from his novel *Dance Dance Dance* became an important motto, or possibly mission statement: “Dance as long as the music plays.”

I found entering the field was akin to entering a dance hall one is not familiar with. The field site has its historical trajectory, proceeding with a momentum that is most likely different from the trajectory the graduate student researcher has been drawing in living a life at school, a world in itself segregated from the “world out there.” Field work is about these two trajectories temporarily coming together. It takes effort to bring one’s life trajectory to meet the world that one intends to study. The field site has its own rhythm, and field work is about sensing that rhythm, and coming to breathe it, and learning to acclimatize oneself to move one’s feet with the crowd. I was not the DJ of that rhythm either, and thus was not in control of the music that was going to be played next, as fieldwork is also about encountering unexpected events. Life in the field was about being disoriented by sudden changes in the rhythm and tempo, falling out of step, and improvising on how to adjust and keep up with the new tune. Often times, response was
demanded on the spot. Sometimes I was given a little more time to strategize on the steps to take. Maneuvers in those instances were experimental and tentative, feeling my way through without much assurance of anything auspicious. I sometimes felt like I might as well stop. At other times, my sense of purpose went missing, making me wonder why I was dancing to begin with. I felt like I was living through an endless routine that saw no exit. At each of these instances, the metaphor of dance helped me to keep on going. The rule of the game was to keep on moving my feet, no matter what, as long as I could hear the music playing.

When I embarked on my doctoral dissertation research I was, and still am, interested in the question of how globalization shapes inequality. At the time of designing my research, academic and media discourse drew a picture of Japanese society making a radical transition from an affluent, stable, all-middle class society to a society divided among the rich and poor. Labor economists and sociologists were studying the exact shape of the emerging inequality using large scale data sets. There were critics who argued that inequality exists in contemporary Japan, but is something that had similarly existed in the past. Such arguments did not satisfy my interest in knowing more about the newly emerging working class in Japan, such as the “hiyatoi haken” workers, or the temporary agency workers hired on a daily basis. Whereas the classic form of day laboring was concentrated in narrow geographical areas and confined to limited occupations (mostly in construction), this new form of day laboring was mediated by profit-seeking, legal corporate middle-men, spreading the logic of just-in-time usage of labor on a nation-wide scale across diverse occupations. Many young workers sought these day laboring jobs using their mobile phones, being dispatched to one location today
and then to another workplace tomorrow. Media reported these precarious workers as the newly emerging victims of the neoliberal order that was permeating Japanese society. On the other hand, Japanese society was also seeing the emergence of the new rich, such as global investment bankers working in metropolitan Tokyo, whose jobs are insecure and who work long and irregular hours yet enjoy a very high salary. These workers carry globally marketable skills and work under qualitatively different employment arrangements compared to the lifetime employment-seniority wage-enterprise unionism triad that characterized the postwar Japanese employment paradigm. If these two populations were the newly emerging upper and working class in Japanese society, I found social entrepreneurs who combined for-profit business schemes with social contributions as the newly emerging middle class. They were well-educated, skillful business owners who sought profit not for the sake of profit-making but for social contribution. Employment and work was a conscious choice of engaging in social action, which was qualitatively different from the hitherto ideal—the typical “salarymen” for whom employment was an unquestioned transition to make after schooling, and who found meaning in work after being hired, such as having to support a family. These groups of entrepreneurs were also qualitatively different from the old-school progressives who tended to frame all profit-seeking activities as inherently exploitative and hence evil, and conceptually limited society-changing actions to the arena of uncompensated, self-sacrificial volunteerism such as holding donation boxes at train stations or pumping fists at street demonstrations. I was interested in learning about the nature of the work these new types of workers were living, how these workers were interpreting their jobs in
relation to what they valued in life, and how they were responding to the working
conditions given the meanings and understandings they had of work, life, and society.

I started this rather overweight research agenda from where I had open access to
the target group: temporary agency daily workers. I first bought myself a mobile phone. I
then visited and registered at the two largest temp agencies in the day laboring business.
In order to study the system of job placement, examine the nature of work, and gain
access to the workers who lived on day labor temping, I deemed it worthwhile to enter
the world of temping myself. The business was still thriving despite society’s growing
awareness of it as an issue, and jobs were readily available. I worked seven stints over the
period of one month from April to May 2008. Workplaces included assistant work for
professional movers, packaging merchandise in a warehouse, and sorting boxes for a
hauling company. Odd jobs included working for a warehouse company and knocking on
each resident’s door to receive boxes of winter clothes and exchange them with summer
clothes. I also worked at a flower market where flowers from plant growers were
gathered from nearby prefectures and auctioned. My job was to unload trucks full of
flower pots and sort them onto designated carriers. Most of these jobs were muscle jobs.
Carrying boxes and bed springs out of a two-story home was more than a good exercise,
and it was backbreaking to unload dirt-filled flower pots from long-haul trucks waiting
their turns in long lines.

However, it was not the physical demand that battered my spirit. It was rather, for
one, the nature of the interpersonal relationships that unfolded at the workplace.
Employees of the user client, such as movers, warehouses, and delivery companies,
treated the temp workers as second-class citizens. When the temp workers’ presence was
recognized, it was their labor power that was sought after. Orders were barked at the temp workers without calling their names. They cracked down on the smallest detail of discontent and yelled their lungs out with rough words. When labor output was needed, temp workers were merely warm bodies. During breaks, temp workers were ignored and became invisible. Just to be accurate, it was not the case that all employees of the user clients were difficult. Some were as friendly and respectful as new teammates can be. But there were too many instances of sullenness and indifference that made the temp work experience one of suffering. Lastly, the most de-spiriting were a handful of instances where I assumed the haters were permanent workers of the user clients, but later found they were seasoned temp workers treating the newbie temps just as badly as the permanent worker would, committing fratricide. And the pay was far too meager to compensate for such physical and emotional wear and tear.

Another issue that I did not anticipate when designing my research was the lack of sustained contact among the temp workers. Because the temp job was a day labor job, workers from all walks of life gathered for that day during the contracted hours, and then dispersed immediately when the job was done, going their respective ways again. On the next job, I met another host of new faces, and I was just another stranger for them, temporarily spending time sharing a workplace. The odd situation was that many of the workers kept themselves closed. Casual conversations among the workers hardly took place. It was a job shunned by Japanese society, and it seemed everyone present felt ashamed of the fact that they were making a living off such a job. Many deliberately avoided others, and the same was the case when I made the effort to strike up a conversation. While the job was accessible, the interaction with workers was intermittent.
and literally temporary. I never met the same workers, and attempts to connect with the workers failed. The workers disappeared into the train stations at an amazing speed after receiving signatures on their work stubs. The best I could do to connect with the workers and listen to their stories was several short minutes of casual conversation during a break with a couple of workers, and a meal after work with a middle-aged man who was making a nation-wide tour with a duffel bag as his only belonging, looking for whatever work available. He was constantly on the move. Temp workers were mobile, always on-the-go, and unpredictable, making sustained, regular contact difficult, and thus deep inquiry even more so.

From a sneak-peek into the world of contemporary Japanese working class life, I was not getting anywhere with building sustained relationships with workers that would yield worthwhile data. All I was getting was autobiographical data that was solely about my experience of day labor temping. It was during the next two months of struggle that I borrowed the words of the Sheep Man and adopted them as my motto. The principle of life in the field was to keep my feet moving.

I decided to visit the old day laboring community of Kotobuki in Yokohama. Many had been able to study the traditional form of day laboring communities because a physical, geographical community where day laborers lived exist (Fowler 1996, Gill 2001). The community was constituted of daily rented rooms (or beds), cheap eateries, and gambling facilities. Workers found work early in the morning either on the street or through the public employment office located in the community, went their separate ways for the day to work, and then came back to eat, drink, and sleep in that community. Daily temp workers were different in that they created no physical community. Some lived with
their parents. Some rented their own commercial apartment rooms. Others who could not afford their own room used internet cafes, health spas, and 24-hour restaurants to spend the night. If traditional day laborers were bounded and concentrated, contemporary temp workers were scattered and omnipresent. I deemed it would be worthwhile to meet scholars who had studied the community and labor union officers who resided in that community. I might find new ways to study the contemporary day laborers, and day labor temps might even be using this traditional day labor community as a residence, which might offer me regular contact. During my two visits, I was taken on a tour around the district, shown inside the modern flop house, learned the history of the community, ate at the cheap eateries, and participated in the preparation of the soup kitchen. The once-busy community of able-bodied working men had turned into a community of old-aged welfare recipients. No young workers could be seen walking around. The local union officer noticed there were almost none himself.

I also contacted a labor union in Tokyo that organized day labor temps, called Haken Union. I was given a briefing of the union’s history and what the issue was all about from the union’s perspective. I asked the union officer if he could introduce me to any of the temp workers the union had contact with. Through the union, I was able to finally get in touch with a temp worker, one of the very first day labor temp workers to organize a union and struggle in court. The interview was fruitful. He was so passionate about the issue that he spent over two and half hours with me, talking about the life trajectory he had drawn while making a living on a daily temp job. He talked about how he had experienced temp work, and the satisfactions and dissatisfactions he held about work and life. The interview was a success, but limited at the same time. I could have
continued to seek temp workers through the union network and interview them, but that would have been a rather limited and unique population, i.e., unionized temp workers. Although I decided against this, I also participated in a May Day demonstration organized by the Freeter Union (FZRK), a prominent labor union vibrant with energy and creativity, advocating for the recognition and rights of dispossessed, precarious workers.

The decision I reached after two months was to shift gears and participate in a more long term working class temp job, i.e., temping in the factories. Unlike day labor temp jobs, I had learned that factory temping was predominantly a three to six-month contract job with possibility of renewal. The job also provided dormitory housing near the workplace. I presumed such a setting meant that I would be working with the same faces every day, with regularity and sustenance. In addition, the observations and conversations with workers would most likely be “ordinary,” coming from general workers in a natural setting not restricted to unionized workers.

I registered for two additional temp agencies that recruited and dispatched workers into blue-collar manual labor workplaces and conducted participant observation on the job placement processes. Within a week of registering for work, I was dispatched to an auto factory in Kanagawa prefecture, adjacent to Tokyo. I moved into the provided dormitory room with my research gear and minimal daily necessities stuffed in a large traveler’s backpack. However, my first attempt abruptly ended in dismissal on the second day of a shakedown/training period despite my three-month contract with expectation for renewal. The actual cause of dismissal remains unknown. A second assignment was offered to me on the next day, and I accepted. After the summer holidays, when factories are not in operation, I moved into the second factory and spent five weeks on an
assembly line owned by a large electronics company that manufactured engine parts for a giant automaker.

I left the factory in mid-September 2008. After spending a few weeks reorganizing and moving back into my host university’s dormitory in Tokyo, I spent time contacting labor unions and interviewing their members. I also attended workshops, rallies, and demonstrations on the issues of youth, work, and poverty. As I was fortunate to come into contact with the CEO of a small temp agency specializing in door-to-door sales jobs, I interviewed the CEO to obtain an inside look into the temping business. I also met several of my former co-workers with whom I was able to build relatively closer rapport than other workers. These workers served as precious informants even after I had left the workplace. I also registered at two additional temp agencies known for recruiting women for pink collar jobs in offices to gain a comparative view of how temp agencies recruit. These agencies recruited skilled workers as well, such as translators and interpreters.

The remainder of the field work was devoted to interviews and participant observation of the labor movements that erupted in response to the mass dismissal of factory temp workers during the financial recession in the fall of 2008. By October 2008, the air of recession could be felt in the air. Papers were beginning to report big manufacturing firms announcing mass dismissal of their temp workers. Labor unions and cause lawyer groups were running to gather information on what was happening at factories around the nation. My informants were offering me phone calls on how the daily production quota was dropping. Temp workers were starting to be dismissed in the hundreds, sometimes passing the one thousand mark as manufacturing industries faced
drops in sales. Because temp workers were losing their housing along with their jobs, the media covered cases where workers were becoming homeless. I then decided to join a labor union called Shutoken Seinen Yunion (SSU), a community union based in Tokyo, to observe from the inside-out how labor unions were organizing temp workers and waging struggles against corporations and the state on cases of abrupt dismissal. I came into contact with the secretary general of SSU at a public lecture, who invited me to join the union as a researcher. I joined the union in January 2009, and observed the union activities. I participated in the union’s collective bargaining, public demonstrations, regular monthly meetings, and court struggles. I extended my study to other general and community unions in the Tokyo and Kanagawa region, as well as to national labor confederations and enterprise unions in order to have a broader perspective on labor movements focusing on nonstandard employment issues.

In total, I conducted fifty-five semi-structured interviews, including twenty-five factory temp workers, four temporary agency representatives who managed dispatched temp workers (whom I will call “agents”), three permanent employees who had regular contact with temp workers, and four corporate managers that used temporary workers. Other interviewees were temp workers who worked at non-factory sites, such as construction or office settings. Interviews were also conducted with thirteen labor union officers and a journalist active on nonstandard employment issues. As a native speaker of Japanese, I conducted, recorded and transcribed the interviews in Japanese, and then translated the necessary excerpts into English for quoting purposes. Among the twenty-five factory temp interviewees, nine were my fellow temp workers while four were accessed by means of snow-balling, ten were introduced by labor unions, and two were
by direct encounters at social movement events on contingent workers. All interviews were conducted after full disclosure of my researcher identity, including with my fellow temp workers, who were informed of my purpose of research near the end of my stint and were then interviewed with their consent.

The questions covered three main topics. I began by asking about their life trajectories prior to entering the world of factory temping. Questions revolved around the school-to-work transition and work experience prior to temping. I then asked about their daily experiences on the job. I asked about the assigned tasks, their subjective impressions and evaluations of their work experiences, and the nature of interactions on the shop floor. Since many had experienced multiple workplaces as temp workers, hopping from one factory to another, I asked them about their experiences at each factory. Additionally, many had worked at their respective factories for a relatively long period of time—tenure of a couple of years at a single factory was not unusual. Therefore I also asked about the transformations workers underwent in terms of job experience from the moment of entry until the last day on the job. The final set of questions focused on the process of exiting factory temp work. If they had been dismissed, I asked them how the process of dismissal took place, and how they responded. If they decided to leave the workplace, I asked them how and why. Interviews naturally ran long. The most hurried interview lasted 30 minutes, while a typical interview ranged between 90 minutes to 2 hours. Interviews were repeated with six of the factory temp workers, resulting in a total of 4 to 5 hours of conversations per person.
Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I raise the question of how temporary agency work came to exist in Japan. I offer a brief historical narrative on how labor supply business, which was banned after the end of the Pacific War, came to be reinstated with the Worker Dispatching Act in 1986. In Chapter 2, I analyze the structural conditions that make job seekers choose temp work. In this introduction, I have analyzed the structural factors that lead men and women to become temp workers. Job seekers are increasingly, if reluctantly, choosing temp jobs. However, equally important are ways in which temp work is artificially arranged so that it appeals to certain groups of job seekers. In Chapter 2, I discuss this subject and introduce ethnographic data on the screening process in landing a temp job. Chapter 3 then examines the working conditions awaiting the temp workers once they successfully secure a job. I analyze the structural and cultural logic that dominates the shop floor, which fresh temp workers must respond to and manage in order to survive. Chapter 4 analyzes the specific ways temp workers respond to the structural and cultural logic outlined in the earlier chapter, and how temp workers come to be absorbed in the challenges of factory work. While Chapter 4 looks at the atomized, individual forms of worker agency, Chapter 5 examines the collective responses to temporary agency work by looking at how these workers come into contact with labor unions and begin to wage labor struggles. I use the case of the abrupt dismissals that ensued during the financial recession in the winter of 2008 to make my point.
CHAPTER 2
THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF TEMPORARY AGENCY WORK

Japan is no exception when it comes to the growth of nonstandard workers living on insecure and underpaid jobs with limited benefits. The proportion of nonstandard workers has doubled in twenty five years, from 17.6% of employees in 1987 to 35.1% in 2012 (See Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Changing Numbers of Standard and Nonstandard Workers in Japan, 1987-2012

The number of temporary agency workers, an exemplary form of flexible employment, has multiplied tenfold in fifteen years, from 163,000 in 1992 to 1.6 million in 2007, while

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the number of regular, standard employees has continued to decrease since its peak in 1997 (See Table 2.1 & Figure 2.1).

Table 2.1. Number of Temporary Agency Workers in Japan, 1987-2007

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<tr>
<td>Temp Workers</td>
<td>87,000</td>
<td>163,000</td>
<td>257,000</td>
<td>721,000</td>
<td>1,608,000</td>
</tr>
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<td>% among the Employed</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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This chapter surveys the historical emergence of temporary agency work. I examine the process in which temporary agency work became a legal form of employment. Usage of labor force supplied by a third party was common during the prewar period. The practice was prohibited in 1947 under the Employment Security Act by the will of the American occupational force as an undemocratic and backward labor practice, since labor supply business often involved dangerous working conditions, skimming off of payment by the middlemen, and violence in silencing dissent. However, the usage of third party labor continued to exist in several typical forms and grew unchecked to the extent that it required the government to step in. The state decided to regulate the growth by making temporary agency work legal. The state bureaucracy and academics collaboratively designed a triadic employment system that was launched in 1986 under the Worker Dispatching Act (WDA). Usage of temporary agency workers was legally defined as an exception to the general rule that all employment relationship should be direct and dyadic between the worker and the user of worker. However, entering into the decade long recession of the 1990s, the Act underwent a series of deregulations, thereby expanding the usage of temporary agency workers at Japanese
workplaces. The significant change came about in 1999 when the WDA was fundamentally revised so that the use of temp workers was no longer legally defined as an exception to the rule but as a common alternative to permanent employment. In 2004, the WDA enabled the usage of temp workers in the factories, which led to the increase of male temp workers in blue collar manual jobs.

**Temporary Agency Work**

In a dyadic employment relationship, which is the most typical form of employment, the employer directly employs a worker to be engaged in work for the employer. The user of labor is the legal employer, and the employee receives instruction from the employer and engages in work under the employer’s supervision. Temporary agency work (*haken rōdō*) is a triadic employment relationship involving the employer, the temporary help agency, and the worker. In this case, the worker’s employment is mediated by the temporary help agency that employs the worker to be used by a third party. Instead of recruiting workers by themselves, companies in need of workers sign a business contract with temporary help agencies who are professionals in finding, employing, and managing workers on their behalf. Once the worker is employed by the temporary help agency, they report to the client company’s workplace to engage in work under their direction and supervision. Goka (2009) outlines the three main services temporary help agencies provide that appeals to the user clients: (1) Assumption of employer responsibility, (2) Cost reduction service, and (3) Labor adjustment service. These three services, which are interrelated, are what the client company purchase from the temp agencies.
Assumption of Employer Responsibility

When employers need workers, instead of employing workers by themselves, the employer can use temporary help agencies to find and recruit workers. The employer and the temporary agency sign what is called a “worker dispatching contract (rōdōsha haken keiyaku),” which is a business contract that stipulates the specific conditions of work, such as the name of the place of work, job content, hours of work, period of work, starting date, name of a supervisor, and the “unit price” for each worker. Under the conditions of the dispatching contract, the temporary help agency becomes the legal employer of workers while enabling the clients to use the workers without shouldering the legal responsibilities as an employer. Some laws that stipulate the responsibilities of employers include the Civil Code, Labor Standards Act, Labor Contract Act, Minimum Wage Act, Employment Insurance Act, Health Insurance Act, and Labor Union Act. User clients become exempt from many of these responsibilities by paying the temp agencies to become the legal employer on their behalf.

The biggest employer responsibility from which the corporations are relieved is the Labor Contract Act that stipulates the conditions for legally dismissing employees. Article 16 of the Act states, “A dismissal shall, if it lacks objectively reasonable grounds and is not considered to be appropriate in general societal terms, be treated as an abuse of right and be invalid.” What is considered “objectively reasonable grounds” and “appropriate in general societal terms” is confirmed by judicial precedents. All of the four following conditions must be met in order for the dismissal to be valid: 1. Necessity for dismissal; 2. Exhaustion of evasion measures prior to dismissal; 3. Reasonable and valid
selection of the dismissed; 4. Appropriate or due process. Corporations or employers are responsible for establishing evidence for meeting all of the four conditions in case of a labor dispute.

Studies show that it is in countries with stronger employment protection legislation for permanent jobs where temporary employment is used by corporations to attain flexibility in the workforce (Booth et al 2002:F184). Japan can be considered as a country with relatively strong employment protection legislation for permanent workers. Corporate executives likewise find Japanese labor laws restrictive when it comes to maintaining flexibility with the permanent workers. In an interview (in writing) with a corporate executive of an affiliated company with a giant automaker, I asked the reason why his company uses temporary agency workers. He answered, “The biggest reason is that there is a big restriction in dismissing regular workers.” I asked him what he meant by “big restriction,” whether he is implying about the labor laws, pressure from labor unions, cultural norms and taboos against releasing permanent workers, or a rational interest in keeping the experienced, skilled workers who are difficult to replace. While acknowledging the union’s strong interest in protecting the jobs of the regular workers and the company’s long-term investment in skilling its workforce, he pointed out the labor laws as the biggest barrier.

By using temporary agencies, corporations no longer must abide by the restrictive dismissal doctrine in order to release workers from their workplaces. Corporations are able to use the labor provided by the workers while having the temporary agencies fulfill the legal employment responsibilities. The same executive stated in the interview, “The role we expect the most to be served by the temporary agency workers is as an
adjustment valve of employment.” He stated that the company was able to maintain its regular workers even in the face of a steep drop in production, thanks to the temp workers, as happened during the financial recession in 2008. The worker dispatching system enables corporations to flexibly adjust the labor force as a business transaction (Nakano 2006).

Cost Reduction Service
Once in a business relation with the user client, temp agencies do all the necessary work for recruitment, which includes posting job ads, selecting workers through screening measures such as interviews and exams, and doing the paperwork to employ the workers legally. All of such cost is externalized to the temp agencies. In fulfillment of the legal employer responsibility, medical and pension insurance are conditionally provided by the temp agency as well, if the term of employment is over two months and the working hours are more than 3/4 of the ordinary workers of the client company. Providing employment insurance is also the responsibility of the temp agencies for workers whose terms of employment exceed 31 days and who work over 20 hours a week. All of such services provided are costs reduced for the client in using labor power to run a business. Japanese corporations are also known to provide hefty benefits to their permanent workers, such as semi-annual bonus payments and various allowances that include housing, child educational support, and transportation fees. User clients do not offer these benefits to temp workers. Using temp workers exempts the user clients and allows them to reduce these costs.
In addition, the wages of temp workers are included in the worker dispatching fees paid by the user client to the temp agency. Determining the actual wages of the temp workers and making the monthly payment of wages also become the services provided by the temp agency. All of these costs are paid as the worker dispatching contract fee, from which temp agencies subtract the costs for advertisement, insurance for the workers, and the workers’ wages calculated after factoring in their own profit margin. Therefore, the ways in which wages are determined differ between the permanent workers and the temporary agency workers.

The permanent workers’ wages in Japan draw a curve. They are usually determined by multiple factors that include seniority, review of performance, and the annual negotiation of wages between the management and the union in case of unionized workplaces. Due to the seniority-based wage system, newly-hired regular employees begin with a relatively low wage, and work up the pay scale assuming the worker will remain with the company throughout their work career until retirement. In the case of temp workers, their wages are determined by the power relationship between the user clients and the temp agencies. All of the four temporary agency representatives I interviewed stated that the unit price (hourly wage of temp worker) is set by the user clients without much room for negotiation. User clients are usually operating with a certain fixed price, or with a flat rate, with numerous other temp agencies. Given the situation of “take it or leave it,” temp agencies lacking negotiating power usually accept the given price. Each temp agency then takes home the unit price and determines the hourly wage of the worker by deducting the necessary costs and factoring in the company’s profit margin. Temp workers’ wages therefore do not draw a curve.
Regardless of age, credentials, work experience, or length of service, temp workers work for a flat rate. According to the executive officer of the affiliated auto company, while the cost of using temp workers are in fact higher when compared to using permanent workers fresh out of school, the cost of using temp workers becomes relatively lower for corporations with an aging workforce (meaning at workplaces where seniority weighs heavily in determining the wage).

*Labor Adjustment Service*

Related to the above two services, user clients purchase labor force flexibility by using temp agencies. By maintaining a short term business contract with the temporary help agencies, such as on a monthly basis, the user client can choose to renew the contract with the temp agency when they wish to continue using the workers or to not renew when they no longer need the temp workers. User clients can also break the contract to immediately reduce the number of temp workers by paying the penalty fee instead of facing the legal consequences of abusing the right of dismissal as a legal employer. Such flexibility saves the cost of keeping redundant employees during slow business times. As noted earlier, the Employment Contract Act and the judicial precedents require that the employer take all evasive measures possible before releasing its regular workers. One of the evasive measures includes the termination of usage of temporary agency workers, along with reduction of overtime work, semi-annual bonus payments, reduction of managements’ wages, new hires, and temporary closure, among others. Hiring for the purpose of firing is a significant part of the temporary agency work as an employment system.
Under such arrangement, it is part of the temp agencies’ job to withdraw their employees from the client’s workplace when they are no longer needed. When more workers are needed, the user client can pick up the phone and call the temporary help agency to bring in workers in just the right time and amount they need. Large manufacturing companies, like the first auto maker to which I was dispatched, provide an office space within their factory premises for the temporary help agencies they use. Temp agencies also create branch offices strategically nearby major factories. That is because such physical proximity to the user clients make the temp agencies’ response time faster, a win-win situation for both sides.

Araki, a temp agency representative in business for fourteen years whom I interviewed, described his daily work routine as an agent. His work day began by visiting the factories he was in charge of every morning. I noticed also that my agent was present at the factory premise every morning I temped, usually standing around at the smoking area outside the cafeteria where many workers hung out before work began. He engaged in casual conversations with his own employees. Araki told me that agents at least try to visit every factory every day not only to check how his employees are doing but also to talk to the factory clients and see if there are any needs to pull out or bring in workers. The presence of these agents enable quick adjustment in the labor force, and such just-in-time flexibility is what appeals to the user clients in using temp workers.

**Historical Precedents of Triadic Employment Relationship**

The benefits of recruitment outsourcing, flexibility, and cost-reduction that a triadic employment relationship can offer appealed to many corporations in prewar Japan.
Occupations such as longshoremen, factory work, mining, and construction work have historically been using third party labor that was recruited and provided by “labor bosses” who ran a labor supply business. These businesses were often times shady: they involved the usage of violence to control the workers, housing workers in cheap, unsanitary flop houses, and skimming off wages when the payment from the user corporations was made through the labor boss. After the end of the Pacific War, the American occupation force found such usage of labor to be pre-modern and undemocratic when drafting the labor laws. The Employment Security Act of 1947 banned the labor supply business in addition to prohibiting intermediary exploitation in the Labor Standards Act in the same year. Only labor unions and public labor offices were allowed to serve as intermediaries between job seekers and user clients.

*Continued Usage of Third Party Labor*

Day laborer communities, such as Tokyo’s San’ya, Yokohama’s Kotobuki, and Osaka’s Kamagasaki, are well established and have been the subject of considerable academic research (Fowler 1996; Gill 2005; Gill 2001; Shakai Seisaku Gakkai ed. 1999; Tsukada 2005). Major Japanese companies have a vertical relationship with smaller subcontractors, which are independently owned but bound together in long-term relationships called *keiretsu*. These *keiretsu* companies serve as a buffer in economically difficult times, and at the very bottom of this hierarchical order were the day laborers who were recruited by the smallest companies at the bottom of the *keiretsu*. Established communities of day laborers provide affordable housing in flophouses (*doya*) that can be rented on a daily basis, surrounded by cheap eateries, shower facilities, and pachinko
parlors. Residing in these doya, day laborers either find work at an open-air informal labor market (yoseba) through a job broker (tehaishi) or legally through the public labor exchange usually located in the area. Many of these job brokers were often times members of organized crime families (yakuza) who were making profit through intermediary exploitation, and each community has their own history of violent, bloody clashes between the workers, the job brokers, and the police.

The existence of such labor markets with a middleman for construction work dates back to the pre-modern era, and continued well into the postwar period. The physical space of yoseba and doya set geographic limitations for recruitment of those potential short-term laborers, but this situation was radically transformed by the legalization of the labor supply business in 1986. The flexible recruitment of precarious labor on an employ-as-needed basis was applied nationwide across industries via the introduction of the Worker Dispatching Act in 1986.

The use of short-term contract workers provided by a labor supplier also has a history in the manufacturing industry, and the practice continued even after such practice was made illegal in the 1948 Employment Security Act. Some of the workers that used to be informally hired by labor bosses were turned into directly hired, short-term workers called “seasonal workers (kisetsu kō)” or “temporary workers (rinji kō).” Others were used as “subcontract workers (ukeoi rōdōsha).” Subcontracting work is a legal system of labor relations that use subcontracting companies to do work for the parent company. Besides the directly hired temporary workers, who were mainly farmers with free time during the winter season, there existed a host of subcontracted workers who were direct employees of the subcontractor that engaged in work which had been contracted out.
When this subcontracting relationship took place within the parent company premises, such as taking responsibility for running an entire assembly line at the parent company, this form of work (kōnai ukeoi) entered into the legal gray zone. The Employment Security Act set a strict standard regarding ukeoi work to distinguish it from labor dispatching. One requirement was that workers could only take work orders and directions from the subcontracting company. If the worker took orders directly from the parent company employee, it was considered as illegal usage of third party labor. In real factory work settings, the legal boundary often blurred between subcontracting and illegal dispatching (Okamura 2009, Imai 2004, Takanashi 1987). In some cases, the user company’s employees gave direct work instructions and orders to the employees of the subcontracting company, essentially turning the relationship into one of third party employee without a direct employment relationship. This type of external labor force was used in the factories to manage fluctuations in production and keep the production cost low.

Illegal usage of third party labor also grew in office settings. In 1966, the American temporary help agency Manpower opened its first branch in Japan (Nihon Jimushori Sābisu Kyōkai ed. 1996). The company sought business opportunity in Japan especially targeting women who were facing structural barriers in returning to work after giving childbirth. There were women who had work experience and held marketable skills as typists, telex operators, secretaries, and translators, but opportunities for mid-career entry were limited for these skilled workers. Corporations were also willing to make good use of these workers as long as they could be used as workers belonging to the external labor market. Manpower Japan brought in the system of registered-type temp
work beginning in the late 1960s. Japanese corporations also began to emerge within this targeted market niche, which operated under the disguise of “service subcontractor.”

Legalizing Labor Supply Business

Scholars are in agreement that the Worker Dispatching Act was enacted partly in response to the spread of illegal use of the external labor force (Imai 2004; Takanashi 1987; Wakita 2008; Ohara Shakaimondai Kenkyujo 1984). Entering into the 1970s, Japan suffered from the oil shock, which led corporations to take measures in slimming down their operation costs called “genryō keiei,” which increased the demand for the flexible use of cheap, temporary labor. The government deemed the growth of this illegal use of labor as reflecting the growing needs of both employers and the workers. However, the state also viewed it as a situation requiring regulation. The Ministry of Administrative Management, a former body of the state that was later consolidated into the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, issued a recommendation to the Ministry of Labor to examine the status quo of the growing labor supply businesses and initiate a review process on the appropriate ways to regulate the business in light of the Employment Security Act. In the same year in 1978, The Ministry of Labor formed a study group constituted of ministry officers and scholars called the Demand and Supply of Labor System Research Group (Rōdōryoku Jukyū Shisutemu Kenkyūkai). The group analyzed the nature of the issues concerning the demand and supply of labor, and began discussing the shape of alternative employment systems that were better able to meet the needs of the time. In April 1980, as an advisory body, the Research Group submitted a proposal to the Director of the Employment Security Bureau, Ministry of Labor, recommending the
legalization of the worker dispatching business. In the following month of May 1980, the Ministry of Labor then formed the Worker Dispatching Business Investigation Committee (Rōdōsha Hakenjigyōmondai Chōsakai), this time a larger group constituted of members representing employers, labor, and the public interest. The group also included representatives from labor unions and private businesses that currently ran a labor supply business.

In 1981 after a series of meeting, the discussion within the Investigation Committee on the legalization of worker dispatching as an employment system came to a standstill. Opinions for and against the legalization clashed in the Investigation Committee. Labor unions, the only institution at that time that was allowed to run a labor supply business, voiced opposition based on the reason that the legal separation of user and employer of workers were going to make employment insecure. Voices of support were heard from the private business owners. However, during this time, the business environment for the manufacturing industry was facing a rapid technological change, i.e. advancement in micro-electronics. Electronics corporations were in serious need of system engineers and programmers who held the most advanced, up-to-date knowledge and skills, which they could not secure in-house. These corporations were increasingly willing to tap into the external labor market for these knowledgeable, skilled professionals. In other words, it was the labor representatives from the electronics industry that also recognized the utility in institutionalizing the worker dispatching system that was to provide functional flexibility to its workforce. At the 1983 annual meeting, the umbrella organization of labor unions in the electronics industry Denki Rōren adopted the policy to promote worker dispatching, and in accordance to the
decision, one of the four labor confederations Chūritsu Rōren submitted a letter of request to the Ministry of Labor to reinstate the discussion process of institutionalizing the worker dispatching system. This triggered the Ministry of Labor to reinstate the discussion on the legalization of worker dispatching in late 1983. In early 1984, the Subcommittee on Worker Dispatching was formed within the Central Employment Security Council by the Ministry of Labor, which drafted the Act that was then submitted to the Security Council, and then finally to the Diet. The Act was passed in the Diet in 1985 and then enacted in 1986.

The Worker Dispatching Act legalized two types of worker dispatching: Specified Worker Dispatching (Tokutei Rōdōsha Haken) and General Worker Dispatching (Ippan Rōdōsha Haken). The Specified Worker Dispatching is a type of temp work called “regular employment type (jōyō koyō-gata),” meaning the dispatched temp worker is employed by the temp agency at all times. The temp worker is regularly hired and paid by the temp agency even when not working for or at the client worksite, just like a directly hired employee at any company. This style of temp work is akin to one’s employee dispatched to another company and returning to one’s own when the job is finished, all during which employment relationship between the temp worker and the temp agency is maintained. In contrast, the General Worker Dispatching is called “registered type (tōroku-gata).” The registered type temping follows a different logic; the temp agency maintains a database of job seekers who visited and registered for the temp agency. Information such as the job seekers qualifications, job preference, and contact information is stored on to the computer, and those job seekers who registered begin to receive regular emails regarding jobs that have become available. It is only when the
temp agency secures a worker dispatch contract with a company that the temp agency advertises a job and recruits job seekers either from the pool of registered workers or possibly from new job seekers who visit the temp agency in response to the advertisement. Employment relationship takes place only upon the availability of work. It is the registered-type temp work that gave the power of just-in-time flexibility to this employment system. The key was turning job seekers into a database that enabled maintaining a pool of workforce without being bound by the cost of employment. In addition, with the technological advancement, temp agencies were able to maintain contact with job seekers using a mass email system and an accessible homepage to which job seekers can quickly respond using their mobile devices.

**Deregulation of the Worker Dispatching Act**

The Worker Dispatching Act at its inception was relatively restrictive. The Act legalized 13 occupations, and imposed a limit on the length of time that industries could use the dispatched workers. A nine-month limit was set for 12 occupations, and a one-year limit for the one remaining occupation. In effect, the Worker Dispatching Act upheld the preceding norm of Japanese employment practice, i.e. the principle of a dyadic, direct employment relationship between the user/employer and employee, and these specific occupational categories were approved as exceptions to the rule.

However, since the inception of the Act in 1986, a series of deregulations has expanded the permitted occupational categories and extended the time limit, which took place during the decade long recession of the 1990s. The burst of the bubble economy and the economic stagnation in combination with the increasing global competition
served as a significant momentum for revising the Act to expand the usage of temp workers. In 1995, the Japan Federation of Employers’ Association (*Nihon Keieishadantai Renmei*) in 1995 published an employment policy platform titled “The Japanese Way of Management under the New Era.” This new blueprint schematically separated workers into three types: long-term skill-building worker; highly skilled professional worker; flexible employment worker. The blueprint limited job and wage securities only to the first category which constitute “the core worker” while explicitly tapping the external labor market to use the latter two groups of workers.

The deregulation of the WDA was part of the larger trend in flexibilizing the labor market. In 1995, the Socialist-LDF coalition cabinet formed the Administrative Reform Committee inside the Prime Minister’s Office. Under the Reform Committee was the Deregulation Subcommittee that was specifically formed to design deregulatory policies. In 1998, under the Hashimoto Administration, the government created the Deregulation Committee headed by the business leader Miyauchi Yoshihiko, the CEO of the Orix group and a staunch advocate of a free market. Unlike the tripartite advisory committee, these two committees directly placed under the cabinet office did not include labor representatives, which led to discussion on labor policies coming to reflect the will of the business leaders (Imai and Sato 2011:15; Imai 2011:42-43). This symbolized the close ties between the business and the state in drafting labor laws that met the needs of corporations more than the workers. It was the pressure from the Deregulation Committee that pushed the Ministry of Labor to discuss making revisions to the Worker Dispatching Act (Imai 2011:43). Oppositional voices from the labor representatives in the
advisory council were overpowered by the direction for revision set forth by the Deregulation Committee. In 1999, the Worker Dispatching Act was radically deregulated.

The revision reversed the process by lifting the general ban on dispatched workers except for specified occupational categories. If the pre-1999 WDA was a “positive list” that listed legal occupations that can use temp work, the post-1999 WDA became a “negative list” listing a handful of occupations that are banned from using temp work (See Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Deregulation of the Worker Dispatching Act, 1986-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1986 July</th>
<th></th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Positive List” of Legal Use: 13 Types of Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software Creation &amp; Development</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation of Business Equipment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation, Translation &amp; Shorthand Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretarial Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filing Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Research and Data Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation and Processing of Financial Documents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation of documents for trade and related transactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour conducting work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning work at buildings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation and maintenance of building equipments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception and Guide work, Management of Parking lot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1986 October</th>
<th></th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Positive List” of Legal Use: 16 Types of Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 13 Types of Work</td>
<td></td>
<td>Same as 1986 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery Designing and Drafting</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation of Broadcasting Equipments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction of Broadcasting Programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.2. (Continued) Deregulation of the Worker Dispatching Act, 1986-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1990 October</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above 16 Types of Work</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1996 December</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Positive List” of Legal Use: 26 Types of Work</td>
<td>Period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 16 Types of Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Research and Technology Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business planning and development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing and Production of Books and other print materials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commodity design, packaging and advertisement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior design, coordination, and consultation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcer and hosts for broadcast programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction and Guidance for the operation of business equipments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone sales and consultations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service and sales for financial products</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of stage props for broadcast programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1999 June</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal Use: All</td>
<td>Period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 26 Types of Work</td>
<td>3 year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| “Negative List” of Illegal Use |         |
| Construction Work |         |
| Port Work |         |
| Security Work |         |
| Medical Practice Work |         |
| Factory Work |         |
The law now listed four specific occupations in which it was illegal to use dispatched workers while legalized the rest. The 2004 revision allowed dispatched workers to be sent to factories. The 2004 deregulation initially imposed a one-year limit on the use of dispatched workers in factories, which was later extended to three years in 2006.

The original assumption underlying the 1987 WDA was that temp work was only allowed for jobs where either the worker had high marketable skills and can secure decent wages on their own or that the worker did not have a career-based job within the internal labor market. However, the 1999 WDA was a break away from that assumption by liberalizing the usage of temp workers in all jobs, encompassing non-skilled routine tasks including factory work. In the EU, the workers are legally protected by the equal pay principle even though they may work a manual labor job as a temp. The protective law stipulates that the temp workers must not be paid less than the permanent workers on the same job. In Japan with such regulation lacking, the lifting of occupational limitations meant the spread of workers who work alongside the permanent workers at a cheaper and

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**Table 2.2. (Continued) Deregulation of the Worker Dispatching Act, 1986-2004**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legal Use: All</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above 26 Types of Work</td>
<td>Unlimited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others Including Factory Work</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**“Negative List” of Illegal Use:**
- Construction Work
- Port Work
- Security Work
- Medical Practice Work
more insecure employment arrangement while being excluded from the protective institutions that include the permanent employment system, seniority-based pay, and union protection.

**Comparing the Japanese Way of Temp Work with European Cases**

As seen above, the way temp work was legalized in Japan is unique compared to the way the temp work system is legally founded currently in the European Union countries. In Japan, state regulation was imposed by limiting the occupations that can use temp workers, while the EU upheld the principle of equal treatment between the temporary agency workers and the permanent workers.

Takanashi Akira, a professor of economics and an expert in labor markets and industrial relations, played an instrumental role in designing the 1987 WDA. He recollects that the WDA was originally designed so that it allowed the usage of temporary agency workers only for jobs that did not interfere with the internal labor market of the user client, which comprised the male regular workers building a life-long career in that company. Legalization was mostly limited to jobs that did not work on such a career path (Takanashi 2009). The Act imposed occupational limitation as a way to contain the spread of using temp workers as cheaper replacements for the regular workers. The Act also allowed temporary agency workers to be used for pink collar, office routine work, given the increasing needs of female job seekers wanting to re-enter the job market after marriage/child-birth yet the lack of opportunities for mid-career employment (ibid).

Some argue that the legalizing temping for pink collar jobs was a mere legal confirmation of existing wide-spread usage (Hamaguchi 2009:32). The Japanese temporary agency
work system was launched in its specific way within the unique context of its labor market.

According to Hamaguchi (2009), the EU regulates the usage of temporary agency workers in a fundamentally different way. The EU refrains from regulating temp work by imposing restrictions on the use of temporary workers. Article 4 of the Directive 2008/104/EC on temporary agency work is a deregulatory clause, stating that prohibitions or restrictions on the use of temp workers must be justified on the grounds of the protection of temporary agency workers, their health and safety, and the proper functioning of the labor market. Instead of occupational regulation, the EU imposed regulation based on equal treatment. Article 5 of the Directive states,

The basic working and employment conditions of temporary agency workers shall be, for the duration of their assignment at a user undertaking, at least those that would apply if they had been recruited directly by that undertaking to occupy the same job.

The general principle at work in EU countries is “equal pay for equal work,” whereas restrictions placed on occupations are recommended to be minimal. The lack of such equal pay principle had a significant impact on the consequences to the temp workers when the WDA in Japan lifted its ban on occupational restriction during the course of twenty years from 1986 to 2004. While the restrictions were gradually lifted and the use of temp workers spread into the routine, non-skilled tasks, what was left in temporary agency work was insecure employment that is significantly underpaid.

The gap of economic well-being between standard and nonstandard workers in Japan is real. When compared internationally, the gap observed in East Asian countries is particularly larger than the gap observed in Western European countries and in the United
States. The standard/non-standard gap in Japan is similar or even more stark than other East Asian countries.

Male nonstandard workers in Japan, including part-time workers, temporary agency workers, and fixed-term contract workers, overall earn about 35% less than permanent workers, while female nonstandard workers earning 57% less, controlling for gender, age and human capital variables such as years of education (Arita 2009:670). Korean male and female nonstandard workers earn 21% and 33% less, respectively, while Taiwanese counterparts earn 38% and 37% less, respectively (ibid). Although precise comparisons are difficult to make, studies on “temporary workers” in Europe, defined as those not on permanent employment contract, show that wage penalties for being a temporary worker in these countries are less severe than in Japan after controlling for all relevant variables (Booth et al 2002, Engellandt and Riphahn 2005, Giesecke and Grob 2004). British male temporary workers earn 7 to 17% less than permanent workers, while female temporary workers earn 7 to 14% less (Booth et al. 2002:197-198). Male and female temporary workers in Germany respectively make 18% and 10% less. In general, these numbers show that the gap between standard and nonstandard workers in Japan is greater than that in European countries. Studies that do not make gender-specific analyses show a similar pattern. Japanese nonstandard workers are paid 37% less than permanent workers, while Taiwanese nonstandard workers paid 32% less, and there is no significant difference observed among Korean workers (Taromaru 2011:65). In Switzerland, by comparison, nonstandard employment results in a 9% wage decrease (Engellandt and Riphahn 2005:284) (See Table 2.3.).
Table 2.3. Differences between Standard and Nonstandard Work in Comparative Perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wage penalty of non-standard employment by gender</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>S. Korea</th>
<th>Taiwan</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(men)</td>
<td>35%(^a)</td>
<td>21%(^a)</td>
<td>38%(^a)</td>
<td>18%(^b) (men)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(women)</td>
<td>57%(^a)</td>
<td>33%(^a)</td>
<td>37%(^a)</td>
<td>10%(^b) (women)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage penalty overall</td>
<td>37%(^d)</td>
<td>Not sig.(^d)</td>
<td>32%(^d)</td>
<td>Not sig.(^d)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage penalty of Temporary agency work</td>
<td>30%(^f)</td>
<td>15%(^g)</td>
<td>9 to 14(^h)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Tenure Difference</td>
<td>7 years(^i)</td>
<td>Not sig.(^i)</td>
<td>Not sig.(^i)</td>
<td>3.5yrs&amp;1yr(^l) (men)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility from Temporary to Standard Employment</td>
<td>12%(^k) (men)</td>
<td>6%(^k) (women)</td>
<td>26%(^l)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Wage gap: standard and nonstandard workers in Japan, Korea and Taiwan for men and women (Arita 2009:670).

\(^b\) Wage gap: temporary and permanent workers in Germany for men and women (Giesecke and Grob 2004:363)

\(^c\) Wage gap: temporary and permanent workers in UK for men and women (Booth et al. 2002:197-198).

\(^d\) Wage gap: standard and nonstandard workers in Japan overall (Taromaru 2011:65).

\(^e\) Wage gap: temporary and permanent workers in Switzerland (Engellandt and Riphahn 2005:284).

\(^f\) Wage gap: temporary agency workers and regular workers in Japan (Taromaru 2009:74-6).


\(^h\) Wage gap: temp. agency workers and permanent workers in Germany (Giesecke 2009:637-638).

\(^i\) Difference in the average number of years on the current job between standard and nonstandard workers (Taromaru 2011:67).

\(^j\) Median duration of permanent and fixed-term contract jobs for men and women in the U.K. (Booth et al. 2002:201-202).

\(^k\) Year to year probability of leaving temp agency work for a permanent job for men and women (Taromaru 2009:66).

\(^l\) Year to year probability of leaving temporary work for permanent job in Switzerland. (Eng. and Rip 2005:286).
Looking at temporary agency workers specifically, a similar pattern emerges: Japanese temporary agency workers are penalized more compared to other developed countries in the west. Japanese temporary agency workers earn approximately 30% less than permanent workers, after controlling for education, age, gender and size of corporation (Taromaru 2009:74-76). A study on temporary agency workers in the west shows that the wage penalty for being a temporary agency worker is 15% in case of the U.S. (Kalleberg et al 2000:272) and 9 to 14% in Germany (Giesecke 2009:637-638).

When it comes to job security, temp jobs are by definition more insecure than permanent jobs. In a study that compares Japan with Korea and Taiwan on the differences in the number of years on the current job, the average gap between standard and nonstandard workers in Japan is 7 years, whereas the difference is not significant for Korean and Taiwanese workers, controlling for gender, age, firm size and occupation (Taromaru 2011:66-68). Genda (2012) refers to a recent trend in government statistics where the job tenure of nonstandard workers is getting longer, which may be pointing to the emergence of “perma-temps” who are for the time being quasi-permanently hired for lesser rewards until the next decline in corporate performance. Booth et al. (2002) shows that in the U.K., the job tenure is relatively short for all workers: median duration of permanent jobs is 3.5 years for men and 2.5 years for women, whereas fixed-term contracts are 1 year for both men and women (ibid:201-202). These studies again show the wide gap between standard and nonstandard workers in Japan.

Job insecurity also takes the form of non-renewal of fixed term contracts (Imai 2011). In Japan, approximately half of registered-type temp workers work on a fixed term
contract of 6 months of less, while over half have been working on their current temp job between 6 months and 3 years (See Figure 2.2.).

Figure 2.2: Terms of Employment Contract and Length of Time on the Current Job, 2008

![Figure 2.2: Terms of Employment Contract and Length of Time on the Current Job, 2008](image)

This shows that temp workers work by renewing short-term contracts, which is a form of employment insecurity inherent in their employment arrangement. Another government survey shows how temporary agency workers lose jobs at an accelerating rate compared to other workers. Figure 2.3 shows the rate of increase in involuntary unemployment by employment category of one’s previous job. Because the majority of the employed are regular workers, the actual number of involuntary unemployed is largest among the
regular workers. The base level of unemployed workers in each category in Jan-March 2007 is set as 100 percent and the percent change in unemployed for each quarter is measured against that base. The graph shows that temporary agency workers lose jobs involuntarily at a sharply accelerating rate when the economy sours, while the rate of increase for both regular employees and part-timers/arubaito workers is contained at about a two-fold increase.

Figure 2.3: The Changing Rate of Unemployment by Employment Category, 2007-2010°

Table 2.4: Labor Adjustment Performed by Companies in Japan, 2007-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Restriction of Overtime</th>
<th>Non-Renewal of Contract or Dismissal for Seasonal</th>
<th>Reduction of Mid-career Employment</th>
<th>Relocation</th>
<th>Transfer</th>
<th>Temporary Shutdown</th>
<th>Voluntary Retirement and Dismissal</th>
<th>Reduction of Work Days and Hours</th>
<th>Reduction of Temp Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007 July-Sept</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 Oct-Dec</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 Jan-March</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 April-June</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 July-Sept</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 Oct-Dec</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 Jan-March</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 April-July</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 July-Sept</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 Oct-Dec</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Jan-March</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.4 shows that during economic downturns, agency temporaries lose jobs while permanent workers predominantly face reduction of work hours or job transfers. Dismissal of temp workers is used as the second most popular means of labor force adjustment, only after reduction of overtime work. The pattern of temp workers losing jobs while permanent workers experience reduced pay is prominent (Ministry of Labor Health and Welfare 2007-2010).

Looking at mobility, or the probability of nonstandard employment leading to a permanent job, Japanese temp workers again show a relative disadvantage. Year to year probability of leaving temporary agency work for a permanent job in Japan is 12% for men and 6% for women (Taromaru 2009:66). Year to year probability for leaving temporary contract work for a permanent job in Switzerland is 26% for both genders analyzed together (Engellandt and Riphahn 2005:286) (See Table 2.3). Taking a look at the domestic mobility of Japanese temporary agency workers from a different angle, government statistics show that 86.5% of corporations that use temporary agency workers do not even have an institutionalized route to re-hire the temp workers directly, meaning there exists no bridge between temporary agency work and direct-hire employment by the user client. A further 3.4% of corporations have such a route in place yet have never promoted a temp worker to direct employee in practice. That leaves just 9.1% of corporations that have ever re-hired even a single temporary agency employee as their employee (Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare 2009). Relatively speaking, temporary agency work in Japan can be considered a dead-end job, while studies on temporary work in European countries where employment protection legislation is weak have at least
partially confirmed evidence for temporary employment functioning as a “stepping stone” for permanent employment (Booth et al 2002; Gash 2008; Smith 1998).

In a country like Japan where the job pays little, has few benefits, and has meager prospects for mobility into permanent status, temporary agency work is a less appealing form of employment. Part-time workers are predominantly middle-aged women and most likely have other sources of household income such as a working husband, although middle-aged women who depend on their own source of income have some of the most restricted employment opportunities in Japan. Compared to female part-time workers who may want the flexibility of non-regular employment and arubaito workers who are most likely young and either still in education or are freeters, temp workers become temp workers reluctantly (See Figures 2.4 and 2.5).

Figure 2.4. Reluctant Nonstandard Workers I, 1994-2010a

"I chose the current job because no company offered a permanent position"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Part timers</th>
<th>Contract workers</th>
<th>Temporary agency workers</th>
<th>Short time worker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.5. Reluctant Nonstandard Workers II, 2003-2010

The proportion of those who became temp workers because no better alternative was available has been increasing (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2011), which makes the issues pertaining to this group of workers even more serious and thus worth studying (Taromaru 2009).

Summary

Temporary agency work is a unique employment system defined by its triangular relationship in which the temporary agency is the de jure employer while the worker is dispatched to work under the direction and supervision of the client company. Such employment arrangement has its utility: temporary help agencies provide services that are good for business, such as assuming employer responsibility, reducing the cost of managing and controlling labor, and quick adjustment of labor. Such labor supply
business was made illegal after the war for its undemocratic nature that involved exploitation and violence in recruiting and managing the workers. However, during the course of the postwar economic development and entering into the decade-long recession during the 1990s, the Worker Dispatching Act was legalized and then deregulated given the increased needs for workforce flexibility. Sociological studies on institutional development (Beckert 2010) would suggest there are “varieties of temporary agency work systems” at work among capitalist industrialized countries, borrowing from the idea of “varieties of capitalism” approach (Hall and Soskice 2001). A comparative look into the Japanese temporary agency work shows its unique shape of imposing regulation by restricting the usage of temporary agency workers, whereas the EU counterpart regulates by the principle of equal treatment. The consequence is the stark gap in employment conditions between temp workers and regular workers in Japan as the restrictions placed on usage was gradually banned. History and the specific shape of the Japanese labor market explain the divergence between the Japanese and EU experience of temporary agency work. Comparative look at survey results show that the gap between permanent and nonstandard workers is particularly wide in Japan. It is for this reason that Japan is uniquely well-suited as a site for examining the processes of workers’ responses to “bad jobs.”
CHAPTER 3
THE MANUFACTURED APPEALS OF FACTORY TEMP WORK

As we have seen so far, macro structural comparison of temp jobs with regular, permanent jobs shows that the former are underpaid and insecure with limited benefits. Journalistic writings on temporary agency work also have reported critically on this particular form of employment due to these factors (Asahi Shimbun “Rosuto Jenerēshon” Shuzaihan, Mizushima 2007, NHK Supesharu “Wākingupua” Shuzaihan ed. 2007, Tōkairin 2008). Many have entered the world of temp work since it became a legal form of employment, and this increase has been explained in terms of “push factors,” such as the decreasing availability of permanent jobs and the accompanying liberalization of flexible employment. Temp workers do indeed show the highest proportion of workers who reluctantly work a nonstandard job. Historical development and change in the Japanese labor market explains much of why this society is seeing an increase in the number of nonstandard workers who suffer from job and wage insecurities.

However, equally important to these structural changes that usher job seekers to become temp workers are the manufactured appeals that lead job seekers to choose temp work. We know little about the “pull factors.” As I hunted for temp jobs, experienced the job placement process, discussed with temp workers their experiences of job placement, and interviewed temp agency managers, I came to see that this particular form of employment system was arranged and presented in a way that appealed to workers with defined characteristics, which enabled the labor supply business to thrive.
This chapter examines the allures of temp work from the workers’ point of view and how the workers are led to choose temp work over other jobs available to them. This chapter answers the following questions: What is it about temp work that leads job seekers to become temp workers? Where and how do they find temp work? What kind of screening and job placement processes do workers go through? I demonstrate that for job seekers, temp work has its manufactured appeals. I argue that finding and securing factory temp work is akin to satisfying hunger at a fast-food joint: some choose it because temp jobs are frequently available, accessible, fast, and alluring, even though the jobs provided may be unhealthy.

**Temp Jobs as Available**

Just as the sheer frequency of contact with fast food restaurants becomes a reason for hungry people to eat their food. One factor that makes job seekers take temporary agency work is because temp jobs are there, readily available. In Japan, the primary mode of acquiring a permanent job is by making a seamless transition from school to work (Kariya 1998, Rosenbaum and Kariya 1989). These permanent jobs are predominantly open to those who are still in school, advertised in a limited fashion and accessed through the job applicant’s official status in a high school or college. The jobs that are “open-access” and are advertised in job magazines, newspapers, and through public employment offices increasingly become the nonstandard jobs, especially when the school-to-work transition system has at least partly weakened (Brinton and Tang 2010, Honda 2003) in the context of prolonged recession during the 1990s and business’
increased demand for flexible, temporary workers while maintaining the employment of regular workers (Genda 2001).

The omnipresence of temp jobs is made possible by the free job advertisement magazines available at local convenience stores and train stations. These magazines advertise employment opportunities at factories hundreds of miles away. Manufacturing industries are geographically concentrated in the Kantō to Tōkai regions, and temp agencies that operate on a national scale have local branch offices from the northern Hokkaidō region to the southern Kyūshū-Okinawa region, giving job seekers access nationwide. Many of the temp agencies also have a website that enables access to job ads regardless of the job seeker’s geographic location. It is common for the websites and print-based job advertisements to list a toll-free phone number that job seekers can call from anywhere. Some small temp agencies aim at recruiting local workers to serve local clients; other temp agencies, especially large corporations, operate on a national scale, utilizing a web of branch offices and dormitory housing near factories that transcends the geographic barrier for just-in-time recruitment and dispatching of workers. Having local access to distant jobs especially appeals to those in the rural regions where decent jobs are scarce.

Temp agencies also offer jobs throughout the year, whereas many of the permanent jobs are offered only during the “job hunting season” that is designed to be accessible to those in school. Related is the fact that temp agencies are private labor supply agencies that store databases of available jobs. Unlike responding to a single job advertisement by a single company looking for an employee, contacting a temp agency means gaining access to multiple employment opportunities. Temp agencies are designed
to provide a menu list of currently available jobs from which ideally job seekers can choose. This structure of finding work through an employment agency makes temp work increasingly available. Job seekers can register at any number of temp agencies. As a consequence, the frequency of contact with temp jobs multiplies with the number of temp agencies one registers for even though one may encounter a job ad for the same company through different agencies.

Taira, who lived in Okinawa, a southern island prefecture with the highest unemployment rate in Japan, found a temp job in Mie prefecture through a local temp agency office in Okinawa. As the second son of a financially struggling fisherman, he had been looking for an alternative employment locally. However, when he realized it to be an impossible task with a high school degree, he decided to seek work outside of the prefecture using the temp work system. During the postwar period of rapid economic development and industrialization, job seekers who migrated from job-scarce regions to urban areas were called *dekasegi* workers. Some were farmers who sought seasonal work during the winter season; others moved into the urban region semi-permanently seeking employment. Temporary agency work is used to serve the same purpose in the contemporary era.

In a similar case, Murata graduated from a high school in Miyagi Prefecture in northern Japan. He managed to land a regular job immediately after finishing school as a butcher in Tokyo, but left the job in three months. He did not enjoy the job and also had become homesick, and so returned to his hometown. From then on, he suffered in the depressed local job market. He found sewing work at a small scale textile factory that paid around $1,500 a month. In order to secure a better paying job, he decided to leave
his hometown for the second time, by registering himself at a local temp agency office that introduced him to a factory job in Kanagawa prefecture.

Finding Temp Jobs

The first step I took in gaining access to temp work was by picking up job advertisement magazines on my way home from the nearest train station and upon my visits to local convenience stores. In the summer of 2008, advertisements for work in factories were abundant. I had to come up with criteria for narrowing down my choices of temp agencies and the variety of jobs they offered. I began to pay attention to the ads that looked the most appealing, such as those that listed competitive wages, used color photos instead of simple black-and-white text, and took up a 2-page spread instead of a tiny section in the corner. I chose these criteria based on the assumption that these were factors that would appeal to job seekers on the market. I continued to gather job magazines for approximately two weeks, stacking them up and folding the pages with ads that fit the criteria. This process gave me an idea of the names of temp agencies and the range of jobs and pay available.

I narrowed down to two agencies to give a phone call, as these two agencies had the largest amount of the most luring advertisements that fit the criteria. Their advertisements appeared with regularity across issues and in different magazines. As I searched these companies on the internet, I found they were in fact some of the largest national-scale agencies operating in the human resource business.

I called the temporary help agencies on July 23rd. My call to Agency X reached what sounded like a call center where the voices of people taking phone calls could be
heard in the background. A young female voice with an *anime*-like coquettish tone answered the phone, welcoming me with the usual greetings and asking me about my interest in work. I told her that I was interested in asking a few questions about an advertisement listed in the job magazine such-and-such, and she asked me for the job identification number for the job I was interested in. I gave her the ID number next to the ad “Automobile assemblage in a factory in Kanagawa.” I had several other jobs listed, but gave the ID number for this ad because this position seemed to be the one the agency was selling the most. The same position was found in all of the other ads the agency listed in other magazines. After I gave her the number and was about to follow up with questions, such as the name of the company the job was for, the nature of the task, and about the dormitory the ad advertised as ready for workers to move into, the voice politely cut me off early and said that this was a centralized call center used to arrange interview appointments at the nearest local agency office. She informed me that someone would be at the office to answer all of the questions I had been about to ask. She then guided me through setting up an interview appointment at a nearby temp agency office. I chose the Shinjuku office among several other options, as it was the closest to where I lived in Tokyo. I was then given a list of things to bring to the interview: a name seal (*inkan*), a resume with a current photo attached, and a government-issued ID. Within five minutes of streamlined conversation on the phone, my job interview with Agency X was set for the next day at 1pm.

I called the second agency, Y, soon after I hung up the phone with the first temp agency. The process was quite similar to the first agency, except that the second call was not received by a young female voice at a call center but at what sounded like a regular
branch office, with the hustle-bustle of a typical work office setting heard in the background. The interaction was similar to the first temp agency. After hearing which job I was interested in, the male voice on the other end then asked me when I would be able to visit the office for an interview. Once again, an interview slot right on the next day was readily available. I chose the Shinjuku office, which was coincidentally located very close to the office for Agency X. The interview was set at 3 pm.

Temp Jobs as Accessible

Temp jobs are also an accessible form of full-time nonstandard employment, compared to full-time standard employment jobs. Fast food restaurants are not picky with their customers; they welcome a wide range of customers as long as they have the minimal amount of money to pay for their order. Likewise, temporary help agencies establish a considerably low hurdle in welcoming job seekers into their branch offices and offering them work. Permanent, directly hired jobs in Japanese society are known to be hard to get. Because Japanese permanent workers are some of the toughest to dismiss in practice (Foote 1996), applicants for permanent jobs are carefully selected through a multi-layered, intensive screening process. Background checks on criminal history and records of debt are often conducted. Educational credentials, employment history, and various marketable skills are carefully reviewed and tested. Entry-level job seekers fresh out of school are often required to take written exams and submit essays. Age-based screening of employees is also a common practice in Japanese society.

In contrast, factory temp jobs screen applicants minimally. Even though temp agencies often require job applicants to bring a resume, educational credentials are hardly
questioned. Work experience is taken into consideration, but the lack of it is hardly taken as a reason for rejection. Temp agencies do not run a background check, either. The job interview entails filling out a registration worksheet with a name and contact information, and a list of preferences including geographic location, types of jobs, and pay range. Temp agencies log these data into their computer and maintain a database of workers from which they can choose and contact when a job order comes in. Visitors are also matched with a list of currently available jobs on the spot. The screening usually consists of a few cognitive tests featuring elementary math problems and a dexterity performance test that measures not only physical performance but also the capacity to comprehend instructions and endure simple repetitive motions. Gripping a hand dynamometer to measure forearm strength is also part of the regular screening menu, as many factory jobs involve using an air wrench throughout the day. Therefore, job seekers who have relatively low educational credentials, who are out of school and beyond the marketable age, who have little marketable experience, or who have a troubled past such as a criminal record or being on the run from loan sharks, find temp work appealing.

A somewhat exaggerated popular saying that went around the shop floor was that “temps are hired as long as they come with arms and legs.” One of the reasons temp agencies set a considerably low hurdle and hire workers without credentials is because their clients accept these workers as long as they remain disposal, external workers to the company. When selecting their own directly-hired permanent workers, manufacturing industries use their own selection criteria, and those who do not meet the criteria must use the temp work system to find work at the company. Secondly, setting a low hurdle lets temp agencies gather workers faster and easier in large numbers, which leads to good
business. Araki was a man in his early forties when I interviewed him. He had worked as a temp agent for fourteen years, serving as a branch manager of a mid-sized temp agency catering mainly to blue-collar temp jobs, but had lost that job during the 2008 global financial recession. In our interview, he admitted his own recruitment standards.

Araki: People like us who interview job applicants have this bottom line, a minimal standard we set for ourselves. As long as [job applicants] didn’t fall under my minimal requirements, almost everyone was recruited.

I asked him about the exact nature of the “bottom line” he retained when interviewing applicants.

Kojima: The gate is quite narrow in securing a permanent job. And I believe those who cannot land a permanent job are working in the factories as temps. In that case, in order to recruit such workers, you cannot set the same high standard. You need to set the hurdle lower, if I’m correct?

Araki: Yes.

Kojima: When you hire, do you consider the applicant’s educational credentials?

Araki: No.

Kojima: How about work experience in the factories? I guess it depends on the client, but…

Araki: Lack of experience is generally not an issue.

Kojima: I see… How about age? Do you place any restriction?

Araki: Maybe around 45. I could work it out if the person was one or two years above that, but generally, 45 was the limit.

I asked another agent, Narahara, about his standards in hiring temp workers as well. He had been an agent in the business for three years who had worked for a different agency from Araki. Narahara had been in charge of managing Higa, who introduced me to him. He had recently quit his job as a temp agent—he had found questionable some of the ways the human resource business was run, and he had also judged that now was the time to quit, as he did not see a particularly bright future waiting for the blue-collar human resource business.
Kojima: Did you reject any job applicants?
Narahara: People with an attitude not suited for a job interview...such as displaying a cocky attitude... A really bad case was when the person smelled of alcohol. Another case was when the person appeared to be homeless, looking really dirty.
Kojima: I see.
Narahara: Also, you might not believe this, but the photo attached to their resume was with a happy smile making a “peace (V)” sign. Or the picture was torn by hand into an awkward square shape without using scissors...these people lacked common sense. When I judged I could not manage that person, I failed them...

I also asked him about the characteristics of the “model” job seeker in his interviews.

Narahara: A person with common sense. I am not expecting a man in a suit, but it’s a job interview... If they show signs of wearing their best clothes, if they use proper language fit for a job interview, I can offer them jobs. Or those who can use honorific language... You can tell if the person has common sense when you speak with them.

The above accounts demonstrate that the requirements demanded of job seekers to secure temp jobs are not about academic credentials, work experience, or young age. It has to do more with personal character and attitude, such as speaking the proper language and displaying an amiable personality instead of an aggressive one, which Narahara called having “common sense.” Such criteria are qualitatively different from the selection criteria used for permanent jobs, such as educational credentials, age status, and multi-layered interviews during which one must confess why one wants to work for the company and what he or she can bring to the table.

Client companies sometimes give specific demands to the temp agencies in choosing the workers for them. Although it is illegal for them to do so, client companies do make specific requests, such as “a male worker under the age of 40.” Araki stated as follows:
Araki: When the client did ask for specific work experience, we did require that in our job interview. If no specific demand was made, we hired workers without experience... And when we faced difficulty finding applicants due to the excessive demand for high qualification by the client, the strategy I often used was to hire a worker without those credentials and then convince the client, telling them that ‘He lacks experience, but as a person, he is very good. He is honest. He is willing to work hard.’ That’s how I got the clients to accept and use the workers we dispatched.

Kojima: I see. So it’s not so much about particular skills, but rather about personality, or character, or disposition that you base your decision on.

Araki: You see, basically, what is most troubling is absenteeism. A sincere person doesn’t create a hole on the assembly line without letting me know in advance. A sincere person, an honest person, at least if they seem to be...these people I definitely hired.

And then he went on to state,

Araki: In the end, we have a time limit in finding workers, employing them, and dispatching them to our clients. We face pressure from our clients to bring in so many numbers as soon as possible. So even when I am a bit doubtful about the quality of the applicant, I hire him. I can’t spend time forever in looking for workers, because that is only going to eat up the cost of recruitment. If you spend seven weeks, we pay seven weeks’ worth of advertisement. It’s a waste if you think about the profit rate. If the client is talking about only one or two workers, I send them in within a week.

Kojima: I see. So to be speedy, you lower the hurdle.

Araki: Yes.

Kojima: Okay. And if you are unsure about the particular worker, you send them in anyway, and you probably prepare yourself for a replacement, anticipating your hunch was right.

Araki: Exactly.

Kojima: You send in a worker to meet the deadline.

Araki: Yes. That way you don’t fail your client.

Kojima: And if the worker does just fine, great, and if he doesn’t, you already have a replacement.

Araki: Correct.

Temp agencies strive to strike a balance between speed and the quality of temp workers they recruit and dispatch to the client companies. On the one hand, quality workers make the user client happy, especially when the client gives a set of qualifications to be met, which raises the reputation of the temp agency and leads to good business. Quality workers serve as good advertisement for the temp agencies. On the
other hand, temp agencies must also meet the need for speed. User clients have monthly production schedules which designate the amount of workers needed on the assembly line, and the client companies pay the temp agencies to bring in the needed amount of workers on time. Temp agencies are also in competition with one another to fill the open spots. The more workers temp agencies have working on the assembly line, the more profit the company makes. Speed is profit. However, sending in bad quality workers may lead to trouble at the client company, resulting in bad reputation for the temp agency. Temp agencies do business by balancing these requirements. In case the temp agency cannot find workers with high qualifications, as Araki confessed, he sends in workers with “good character” by lowering the hurdle. In Narahara’s interview, he mentioned that he once told a client who had made excessive demands for quality that a worker with such qualifications would have already secured a permanent job somewhere else. When the client does not make any specific demands, agents hire workers without being picky in order to meet the client’s demand quickly. As a consequence of balancing the client’s demand and maximizing profit, the hurdle established for factory temp work becomes low, making the job accessible for workers who do not qualify for a direct-hire permanent job.

Job Interview

On July 24th, 2008, the day after I made the phone calls for the job interviews, I visited the two temporary help agency offices located in the busy commercial district of Shinjuku. As I exited the elevator, there was no hallway or entrance door, and instead I found myself immediately in an open office space. The office had a somewhat outdated,
tired air that could have been due to the dusty-gray carpet and somber white furniture.

There was a long desk that cut across the room, separating the internal office space and the waiting area for visitors. Two islands of desks faced each other in the office space, as is typically the case for Japanese offices. Two office ladies in blue uniforms were making copies and shuffling through fat blue plastic binders, while several men in ties were either on the phone, gazing at a computer screen, or dealing with a visitor at the desk. My eyes wandering around the office met the eyes of a middle aged man sitting nearest to the desk. I introduced myself as the job seeker with an appointment at 3 o’clock. He led me to have a seat across from him at the long desk and, as I took my seat, asked me to show him my resume and ID. While glancing through my resume, he asked if I was foreign-born. I answered no and explained my life circumstances of being born in Japan but having lived in the United States for some years. (I presume he thought I was a foreigner from the foreign names of my elementary school and junior high school in California.) He then went on to ask about my work experience more in detail. I told him that I had worked at convenience stores, a family restaurant kitchen, and as an English-Japanese translator, the last of which I still did ad hoc when work was available. I also told him that I was registered for other day labor temp agencies as well. After nodding through my employment history while keeping his eyes down on my resume, he was content to pull out some printed documents to be filled out, namely, a privacy of information document and a work preference sheet. The former asked for consent for them to keep my biographical information in their database, promising that the agency would take all measures to protect private information. The latter document was used to inform the agency of my preferences in terms of job types, location of workplace, shift preference,
whether I needed a dormitory or not, and wage range. After I filled out these documents, the interviewer went back to his desk and pulled out a thick file, glancing through it. He pulled out several sheets of paper, xeroxed them, and brought them over to me.

“Here are the jobs I can introduce to you as of now.” One of these jobs looked familiar. It was the automobile factory in Kanagawa, the one I was introduced to at the first temp agency I had just visited half an hour ago. It was at this moment that I decided I was going to go with this job. As I asked a few questions about the specifics of the job, I found out that there was a difference in terms of the dormitory fee—this agency charged nothing for the dorm room, which was a corporate housing facility owned by the auto maker that was being sublet to the temp agencies for their temp workers. The man went on to tell me that the agency would charge 5,000 yen for a futon bed, electricity, and appliance rentals such as a refrigerator and a television. The other temp agency I had just visited charged 27,000 yen for the dormitory and only went rent-less after the fifth month of employment. Surprised by such incomprehensible differences, I began to lean towards being employed by this temp agency rather than the other one.

The second job he introduced to me was a factory in Atsugi city in Kanagawa prefecture. The factory manufactured large copy machines for office use. He told me that this workplace was somewhat easier on your body compared to the automaker in Kanagawa, as it was on-the-line manufacturing of printer cartridges and thus the items would be light-weight. The agency would provide a dormitory room—a commercially rented single-room apartment—at 42,000 yen per month.

The last job he introduced to me was a factory in Mobara city, Chiba prefecture. The factory worked on a triple-shift schedule. It used chemicals to manufacture flat-
screen television panels, and the man told me that some workplaces would require the worker to wear a white, dust-free clean-room garment covering from head to toe. After hearing each of these brief workplace explanations, I told him that the Kanagawa automaker sounded the most appealing at the moment. He gave me a quick affirmative and pulled out several gadgets for screening tests.

The first screening was an elementary level mathematics test, with addition and multiplication problems printed on a sheet of paper. The man had a timer in his hand, and asked me to answer as much as I could within 30 seconds. “Ready, go.” It had been a while since I had worked on math problems under such time pressure.

I had a relatively harder time on the next exam. In a seven-by-seven grid, the numbers from 1 through 49 were printed in each box. The man asked me to point from 1 to 49 in numerical order as fast as I could. He timed this as well. After that, the next test was a dexterity performance test. There were bolts and washers neatly separated in a small plastic box, and ten small circles printed on a sheet of paper. He asked me to pick one bolt and one washer from the box, place the bolt through the washer, and place it vertically within the boundary of one of the circles, and to repeat this ten times. Again, he timed this exercise. Finally, the last screening test was forearm strength. The man told me to yank a hand dynamometer as hard as I could. I adjusted the device so that the width of the grip fit the size of my palm, and crunched it. That was the end of the interview, which took no more than an hour.

I told the interviewer that I would give these jobs consideration and would give him a call back, and thanked him for his time. As I walked out of the office, I was already determined to take the automaker job. The next day, a Friday, I called in to let the agency
know that I was willing to take the Kanagawa auto maker job. The man who interviewed me was not present, so the office lady who answered the phone told me that she would relay the message to him, and asked me to visit the office again on Monday at 3pm for further paperwork and instructions. I asked her when the likely date I would be dispatched to work would be, and was informed that, “August 1st will probably be your first day of work.”

**Temp Jobs as Fast**

Related to the ease of access, temporary help agencies offer jobs fast. As noted earlier, the reputation of a “good” temporary agency from the standpoint of client companies partly depends on how promptly the agency can bring workers to their offices and factories. Temp agencies are just-in-time labor providers, and the demand for speed in the human resource business is reflected in the speed with which a job is offered to the job seeker. Compared to the careful, multi-layered screening process for permanent jobs, which usually takes months for the job seeker, getting a temp job in a factory is considerably faster. Araki stated that the “speed in dispatching workers, the quality of workers we send, and the retention rate” were significant factors in winning trust from the client companies. He continued on to state that two weeks was the average amount of time he usually asked for from the client company. Narahara gave a shorter time frame.

Narahara: This is on average, but all in all, if the agency cannot send in a worker in a week, the spot is filled by a worker brought in by other temp agencies we’re in competition with.

Kojima: That’s quite fast.

Narahara: In the case of factory temp vacancies, sometimes it’s even faster. If the client is asking for anybody, the position is filled in two to three days.
I was puzzled by the speed at which temp agencies operate in dispatching workers. Client companies are often under contract with a number of temp agencies, and a request for workers will be sent to all of these multiple agencies, making speed even more important to beat the competition. However, how is it possible to dispatch a worker in two to three days? The agency must publish a job ad, either wait for a worker to call in or make phone calls using their database list of job seekers, conduct an interview, and then have the worker physically move in to the factory. Hosoe, another former temp agency manager I had the chance to interview, had an answer.

Hosoe: It is not necessarily the case that temp agencies post an ad after we receive an order from a client. Temp agencies have an ad posted quasi-permanently for factories that are our biggest clients. These factories usually pay the highest. And we usually have a constant flow of workers seeking these jobs. And it is to these workers that the agency introduces the “hot” jobs that are in desperate need of workers.

In other words, temp agencies spend money in posting their most appealing jobs on an ongoing basis. They then funnel job seekers who visit the agency office into taking a job the agency needs to fill. Narahara agreed that such was routine practice; many temp workers I interviewed confessed that they were introduced to jobs that they were not seeking. In addition, temp agencies maintain a database of workers. When an agent receives a business order, “I quickly run back to the branch office and start calling the list of workers to see if anyone is willing to take the job,” Narahara said. The demand for speed and the structuring of temporary agency work to enable just-in-time dispatching of workers is reflected in the speed with which a job seeker is able to secure work.

In my case, I called the temporary help agency for an appointment on July 23\textsuperscript{rd}. I secured an appointment to visit the local branch office for an interview/registration on the
next day, and called the office the day after the job interview to inform them of my wish to take the job that had been introduced. Since it was a Friday, I was asked to visit the office for a briefing and some more paperwork on the following Monday, which was July 28th. Then, on August 1st, only one week after I had first called the temp agency office, I found myself in a suburban town in Kanagawa, sitting on a bed in a factory dormitory room.

Securing a Temp Job

On Monday, July 28th, I revisited the Agency Y office at 3pm for a briefing and to be dispatched to the workplace. When I saw the interviewer, we were both in smiles. I was happy that he had offered me a job, an entrance into my field work site. I assumed he was happy for scoring another worker to be sent to the client. He informed me that I had a choice of when to start my first day of work. In Japan, there is a week-long summer holiday called obon from August 9th to 17th. If I started August 1st, I would work for one week and then spend a week at the workplace without work, and thus without pay. He told me I could alternatively start after the obon break if I preferred. I reminded myself that there might be a great deal to do in the dormitory, and that I might be extremely exhausted from the work and thus need that week for physical recovery. There would also be a good chance of getting to know other workers at the dorm, and I might be able to catch up on taking field notes as well. So I told the man, “I still wish to start from August 1st.”

“Okay then. Let me print out some instructional materials for you.”
He brought over a piece of paper titled “Funin An’nai” or “Guide for a New Job Assignment,” with my name and the date of my first day of work typed in. The paper listed instructions regarding when and where to assemble on the first day of work, and described three different transportation routes to the rendezvous train station. One noted Haneda Airport, the nearest domestic flight hub, as the starting point. The second route began from Shin Yokohama Station, with the note “For those who are travelling in from regions south of Kanto” in parentheses. The third route had Tokyo Station as the starting point for individuals coming in from regions north of the Kanto area. These transportation routes implied that workers were gathered from literally all over Japan. The address of the dormitory was also printed on the guide so that workers could send their belongings beforehand. The bottom half of the guide had a simple map of the train station with a star designating the rendezvous point. The guide also noted the phone numbers of the temporary help agents in charge of managing the workers in the factory. Agency Y had a quasi-permanent office space within the premises of the auto maker factory.

Finally, there was also a what-to-bring list, including two identification photographs, a name seal, a copy of a bank book, an identification card, an employment insurance card, pension handbook (nenkin techō), etc.

We then moved on to carefully review a sheet of paper titled “Sagyōjo Setsumei,” or “Description of the Workplace.” The sheet began with my worker ID number and the specific names of the agents from the local temp agency branch who would be in charge of managing me at the workplace. It then specified the work hours, shifts, types of work, hourly wage, and dorm fees. This sheet was also used to inform me of the conditions of
the work I was about to be dispatched to do. The man explained each specification to me one by one, pointing at each section. “This is the office in charge of managing temp workers working for this specific factory. The agent’s name is Sakamoto. If you have any trouble, call him at the cell phone number that I will give you later. Before you talk to people at the factory, always discuss it with the agent first.”

He then explained that I would most likely work on an assembly line. On the sheet, it described the various types of assembly line work: assemblage, painting/coating, and casting of small-size automobiles; manufacturing and assembling bumpers; attaching parts such as glass and tires; applying sealing materials to auto body seams and checking for external dents and lacerations; and attaching parts to bumpers and work related to the painting of bumpers. I asked, “Here it says the average time it takes for you to master jobs at this workplace is 14 days. How difficult are these jobs?”

The man told me it depended on the individual, and that some mastered the work within the two weeks while for some it took a bit longer. “It’s the kind of job where you repeat the same process over and over. Don’t worry, you will get used to it. And I am not worried about you. There are not that many people who ask precise questions like you. It is a measurement of your seriousness towards work. Always ask questions if you are uncertain about anything.” I deemed this as a sign that it was indeed permissible to ask more questions, so I asked: “Are there people who get rejected during the interview process?”

“Yes, there are some. The factory workplace is based on teamwork. You need to be collaborative. If I see an issue during the interview, the person will fail. If the person has an arrogant attitude, and if the person does not fix it even after I warn him, there is a
problem. At the workplace, there are cases where you will be receiving instructions and orders from junior individuals. If you are a person who cannot fit under a person younger than you are, that’s also an issue. But I think you will be fine.”

**Temp Jobs as Alluring**

One of the pull forces that bring job seekers into the world of temp work is the pay. Statistically speaking, temp workers make only about 70% of what permanent workers do, controlling for all variables, as noted in the introduction. However, the advertisements list wages that are appealing to job seekers whose only other employment opportunities are worse alternatives.

Another allure of temp work is the dormitory housing that accompanies temp work like a combo meal. Agencies offer dormitory housing at a relatively low charge compared to renting a room on your own. Sometimes the client companies sublet their company-owned dormitory to the temp agency; in other cases, the temp agency rents rooms from private housing rental agencies, and pays the necessary deposits and fees that the renters would otherwise have to pay on their own. These dormitories make possible the swift transfer of bodies from any geographical location to the vicinity of the new workplace. From the standpoint of job seekers, these dormitories function as an appeal, especially for those who are in need of housing in addition to work. For those living in rural regions where jobs are scarce, one of the main issues they face in looking for work in the urban centers is the lack of a foothold, i.e., housing to stay in. It is often quite difficult to rent an apartment without a job, and without housing it is quite difficult to find a job. Workers in this negatively reinforced situation of lacking both housing and
work thus find temp work appealing. Temp agencies understand the high demand for housing along with work, and offer dormitory housing as a strategy to gather workers. Hosoe stated in an interview,

Hosoe: The agency pays the gratuity fee and the deposit to offer the room to the workers as a dormitory.
Kojima: Why would you pay such extra and offer housing with work?
Hosoe: Well, that’s simply where the temp agency is paying the cost to gather workers. Some say temp agencies are making profit off of the dorm rent by charging extra, but when I was an agent, the dormitory didn’t make any standalone profit. The agency actually paid a huge amount of money for the start-up fee in renting those rooms. In our case, the selling point was to allow workers from anywhere to work at a factory by living in a dorm.

Araki also agreed that dormitories were a strategy to make the temp agency appealing to job seekers and get them to choose temp work. He confessed that it took about four to five months for the temp agency to recover the initial cost invested in getting the worker started in the job, including the dorm’s start-up fee.

The last menu option in the combo meal is the advance payment. The temporary help agency is ready to pay the dispatched worker several hundred dollars’ worth in advance, and will deduct the advance money from the coming month’s pay. Temporary help lets job seekers secure work quickly, and also pays quickly, even before the workers begin putting in their hours. Hosoe recollected that his temp agency offered advance payment for the initial three months. Araki remembered that over half of the workers entering the factory made use of the advance payment system, as his agency offered an advance payment of JPY 20,000 for the first two months. Narahara confirmed that his agency used to have the same system to appeal to job seekers, but abolished the system because the agency found it a waste of money to pay the JPY420 transaction fee in
depositing the advance pay into the workers’ bank accounts, which easily mushroomed into thousands and ten thousands due to the number of workers making use of the system.

**Pay as Advertised**

On July 28th, during my final briefing, the agent also used the Sagyojo Setsumeï sheet to go over the pay I would receive. The hourly wage was set at 1,200 yen, with monthly income estimated at 230,100 yen to show me how much money I could be earning. This consisted of the hourly wage multiplied by 8 hours per day for 21 working days to produce 201,000 yen, plus an additional 11 hours of overtime at 1,500 yen an hour, which came out to 16,500 yen, and another additional 8 hours of holiday shift at 1,500 yen an hour, all totaling to the above monthly wage. In a smaller font, there was a note that my hourly wage would increase to 1,250 yen an hour starting from the second month, and that after September there would be more overtime work and holiday shifts, therefore increasing my monthly earning to 260,000 or 270,000 yen. The agent told me, “So, you will be making pretty good money.”

The monthly pay would be calculated on the last day of each month and would be paid on the 15th of the next month. The man asked me if I had money to survive until payday. He told me there was an advance money lending system if I was in desperate need, pointing to where the sheet noted that workers would need more than 30,000 yen of living expenses until the first payday. The agency will lend you money in advance to be deducted from your paycheck, he told me. I responded that I would be fine.

The man went on to tell me that while the dormitory would be provided free of charge, they would deduct 5,000 yen for the air conditioner, refrigerator, washer, and
bedding supplies. He then asked me which train station I would be departing from, and went back to his computer to calculate what the fare would be. The printout he brought back listed several possible routes to get to the rendezvous train station, with the fare totaling to about 1,350 yen, well below the maximum limit of 15,000 yen that the agency would cover for transportation. Once I had settled into the dorm, the man told me that there would be a free shuttle bus from the corporate dorm to take everyone to the factory together.

Finally, the agent went through a list of documents to bring in order to sign the labor contract on the first day. He also read aloud the sentence, “Due to natural disasters or unpredictable reasons in production there will be transfers of units and workplaces.” However, during the entire conversation, he never hinted at the real picture of this work being insecure by nature. Under the column “Haken Manki Bi,” or the day temp workers are legally no longer able to work at a specific workplace beyond that year, the date was left blank. By law, the temp agency must inform workers by clarifying this date, which Agency Y never did for me. The only place where the possibility of being dismissed for reasons such as a drop in production or being deemed incompetent on the assembly line was hinted at was under the disguising phrase “Due to natural disasters or unpredictable reasons in production…” Nothing about dismissal was noted. Not even the length of the contract was mentioned. Through this interview process, a first-timer who has never experienced temporary agency work does not form an understanding of the nature of dispatched work as insecure, but rather sees only the amount of monthly pay they can gain. This disguised picture of temp work as a secure, good paying job is a significant part of the manufactured appeal that workers find alluring.
At the end of the session, the agent gave me a corporate pamphlet for Y, a series of postcard-like welcoming introductions to work, and strap that one attaches to a cell phone with a corporate character in a hard hat dangling from the end. He also asked me if I wanted the “Encouragement Package” worth the value of 1,000 yen. I asked him what it was. “It’s a package of cup noodles, a small skillet, things like that. Ha ha ha. We give them for first time workers.”

I answered, “Yes, please, I would like to have one.”

As he handed me the papers and pamphlets, the agent told me that the auto maker had contacted him regarding my educational background. The factory had asked him if a person with such high educational background was truly willing to work on their assembly line. Was there some confusion going on here? The agent told me he himself had some doubts. “You probably are not willing to work here as a primary occupation, and already have skills you will be applying to your main work, yet still…” I told him that I wanted to observe and experience a different world. “It’s not that I will be working half-heartedly. I will do all that I can. And I will give my best at it. But please don’t be surprised if I come back to tell you that I am going to quit.” The man laughed and responded, “But don’t come too soon.” “Of course. I have decided to work. I might as well give it all I’ve got before I leave.”

“You will be fine. You have enough forearm strength. And you’re willing to work hard.”

As a final confirmation of my work, the man called the head agent in charge of managing the workers dispatched to the Kanagawa auto factory, and had me talk to him briefly to answer any questions I had. The man on the other end of the line sounded
energetic yet polite; we exchanged greetings, and he asked me if I had any questions. I asked what the schedule was like over the weekend, as the rendezvous day was a Friday. He informed me that it would be a complete holiday for me to use as I pleased.

As I left the Agency Y office, I was ready to head to Kanagawa to begin my participant observation of factory work as a dispatched worker.

Making the Journey

August 1st, 2008 was a hot summer day. I took a two-hour train ride, switching between three trains to get from Chiba prefecture to the rendezvous train station in a semi-rural town in Kanagawa prefecture. I stuffed all my clothes and toiletries into a single backpack, in addition to my laptop, notebooks, digital camera, and voice recorder. Anxiety crept into my initial sense of excitement as I caught the train that headed out beyond Yokohama into an area I had never travelled to before.

Although I had planned out my train schedule in order to arrive well before the designated time, I ended up being five minutes late. This was because the train I caught from Yokohama station divided into a rapid service and a local train at a midway station, and I was seated on the former, which passed the station I was supposed to get off at—I caught a glimpse of the rendezvous train station’s hanging sign, only to see it fly by. I rushed off the train at the next stop, letting the rapid train go by and waiting for the local train. As I was shuffling through my backpack on the train heading back, looking for the phone number of the agent that was supposed to be waiting for me, my cell phone rang. It was 1 pm. Although one isn’t supposed to talk on the phone on trains, I picked it up,
assuming it was him. I hurriedly explained my situation in an apologetic tone and told him that I would be reaching the station soon.

I got off the train five minutes late. I was already in a sweat when I skipped down the stairs to meet the agents, who were waiting for me at the designated meeting point in front of the police box outside the train station entrance. I studied them as I hurried down the stairs; the two men appeared to be young, presumably in their late twenties to mid-thirties. Presumably, they sensed I was the one they had just called, especially since I was carrying a large bag, and as I reached them, the taller man with shorter dark hair opened his mouth.

“Are you Mr. Kojima?” (I nodded.) “Okay, please get on the bus already.”

There was a clean minibus with the company logo of Agency Y printed conspicuously on the side, waiting for the late comers with its engine running. As I boarded, the driver, an older male, greeted me in an upbeat tone with a smile. “Good morning!”

There were about eight people already on board. Each individual had taken up two seats on either side of the aisle, seating themself and the belongings they had brought. Some had brought large duffle bags, others had suitcases with wheels. I was the only one with a backpack. In stark comparison to the driver’s upbeat mood in the front of the bus, the workers-to-be filled the back of the bus with a depressed air. Everyone was silent. Nobody was looking around. They were sitting still, keeping their eyes to themselves—some even kept their sunglasses on in the bus. There were people of diverse generations; I would later learn that the youngest in the bus was 18 years old, and the oldest in his late forties. I saw thick, muscular forearms, and also rather skinny ones. I was surprised to see one person even wearing a suit. While their individual appearances were as diverse as
could be, somehow all of the workers carried a distinct tired air. It was not only the fact
that most did not have a clean shave or were wearing wrinkled clothes or leather shoes
with worn off toes or had dyed brown hair with the original dark hair already grown in by
several inches. It was something about the air their bodies carried, something about their
facial expressions. The bus carried an air of resignation.

We left the station at 1:15pm. No one in the back of the bus was talking, though
the agents sitting in the front were chit-chatting with laughter. It was a short ride to the
automobile factory, which stood facing a wide road; a shiny logo decorated the entrance
gate, with a security post on one side. Inside the factory grounds was a parking lot filled
with commuter cars, almost all of them the same make. The younger agent stood up to
announce that we had arrived and would first go on a factory tour, and therefore to leave
our luggage and only take our valuables with us. We silently grabbed caps and jackets to
be worn while on the tour, and separated into two groups. I began to sweat under my long
sleeved jacket in the hot sun as I listened to the instructions. Before entering the plant, the
agent told us to stay close while listening to his explanations due to the loud noise in the
factory. “We will also be observing the painting process, so if you begin to feel sick from
the fumes, please let me know immediately. Also, you will see robots running around, so
be careful not to get in their way.”

We followed the agents silently and entered the plant through a heavy metal door.
The plant was immense—even a full-on throw of a baseball would not reach the end of
the factory. The floor was painted in green with yellow and white lines drawn on it, and
was shiny clean (as often seems to be the case for manufacturing plants). A veil of
machine noise blanketed the area, and I noticed the distinct smell of machine oil and
metal dust. All of us, wearing the same jacket and brand-new straight-brimmed cap, naturally formed a line to follow the agent. We first arrived at the bumper assembly section. Brand new bumpers were stacked on a huge rack, which workers picked up to scrape away extra burrs on the edges. There were also workers snapping lights and ventilation parts into the bumper, after which it was placed onto an automated line for painting.

Next, we observed the auto-parts picking section. A single worker was busily picking out parts from twenty or so boxes. For each car to be assembled, the worker picked up parts from each box where a green lamp was lit. After the part was chosen and stashed into a box to be carried over to the assembly line, the worker flicked a switch which turned off the lamp. The agent commented, “There is no way of making a mistake. Time is all you need to worry about.”

While we were taking the tour around the factory, an automated tractor no higher than my knees ran by us towing boxes of auto parts, playing the tune of Sazaesan (a Japanese family manga) as an alarm. Every time we heard the tune approaching us, the agent halted his lecture and told us to make way for this crawling machine. Moving on, we observed workers on the assembly line attaching parts to car bodies with powered wrenches, workers applying sealant to door gaps in a single motion like magic, and a silent room where inspections for scratches and dings were conducted. All of the workers-to-be remained silent throughout the entire factory tour. It was not until we finished visiting the cafeteria and stepped outside for a toilet break that one person opened his mouth to ask the agent if he could have a smoke. Hearing the agent’s
affirmation, almost all of the participants present pulled out their packs to light up a cigarette. Even while we smoked, nobody talked.

After everyone came back from the men’s room, we returned to the bus, which to my relief the driver had kept air-conditioned. We then headed to the temp agency office located on the factory premises. I later learned that for big clients like this major auto maker, the temp agency is provided with an office space within the client’s factory so as to be ready to respond to any requests and claims the auto maker may have with the agency and its dispatched workers.

We entered the office to sign papers. After we all took a seat, the agent told us. “…So we have finished the factory tour. Hope you all have a sense of what kind of work you will be asked to do. If you feel you are not fit to work this job, please feel free to tell us so right now…” A moment of silence ensued. This meant that all of us were willing to move ahead and take the job. Each of us was then handed a plastic folder in which a packet of papers to be filled out and signed was enclosed. It was now 2:30 pm. Every document required us to fill in our name, date of birth, address, signature, and seal, including a privacy of information document, an application to use the auto factory dormitory, an agreement to the rules and regulations of the dorm, a labor contract with terms and wage, documents for social security, bank information for direct deposit of wages, emergency contact information, etc. During this paper signing session, many finally opened their mouths to ask questions. Some had documents missing from their packet. Others needed to borrow scissors to cut out their identification photographs. One person forgot to bring a copy of his bank booklet. Another person wanted to borrow white-out. It was already close to 4 pm when everybody finally finished filling out their
documents. Although it was at this moment that we were signing our employment contracts with the temp agency, no explanation was offered regarding the contract, and no one asked. I did not ask a question either. Contracts presented in such a group fashion result in a flow of signing one paper after another.

I simply went with the flow of this day-long, unpaid orientation, without knowing what was coming up next. We then headed on to take a quick health exam. (Two individuals were asked to wait at the office, as they had taken their exams at their previous workplaces.) We were again divided into two groups, and took the agent’s car to a nearby health clinic, where we had our urine sample taken and then saw a doctor in person. The doctor asked, “How is your health?” and asked if I had any history of significant health issues or had any hearing problems. He then asked for my height and weight, listened to my heart with a stethoscope, and finally picked up a blue-capped pen and a red-capped pen and asked me what color they were. The in-person medical check took no more than five minutes, after which I was then led by a nurse to get my chest x-rayed, have my eyesight tested, and have a blood sample taken.

Since I was one of the earlier ones to go through the health exam, I went back inside the van to have a casual conversation with the agent who was waiting for us to finish. He told me that there were about 90 people from Agency Y currently working at the auto maker. I asked him what there was to do here in Kanagawa, but his response was that he didn’t know much about the town, as he had just been assigned to manage the workers here only a month ago.

On our way back to the office, the van was filled with an air of fatigue from the long day. I initiated a conversation with the person who sat next to me, keeping my voice
low as the others remained silent throughout our ride. I asked him how long he had been working as a dispatched worker, what kind of work he had done in the past, where he was from, etc. As we talked, I noticed one of his teeth was missing. Though it may have simply been coincidence, the proportion of people with bad teeth among the temp workers on the assembly line was high compared to the people I had met elsewhere.

We returned to the office, where it which was now filled with cigarette smoke from the two individuals who had been left there to wait, and finally headed back to the shuttle bus to have it take us to our dorm. The suburban town was lit in orange, with students riding their bicycles home; I fell asleep without realizing it, only waking when the bus had arrived at the dormitory complex. We were then handed our dormitory room keys, along with the “Encouragement Package (or the Seikatsu Ōen Setto)” for those who had requested one, and were asked to go find our room, leave our luggage, and come back for a short orientation of the premises.

The dormitory was a complex of ten apartment buildings. Most were a four story walk-up, and two newer buildings had an elevator going up to the seventh floor. The buildings reminded me of public housing, usually decades old with minimal money spent on renovation and maintenance. The surrounding area was dark—the vending machine did a better job of lighting my way. I took off my shoes to enter the apartment building, luckily assigned to the newer building with an elevator, and as I walked down the linoleum hallway, I noticed it was shiny in the middle and soot-blackened towards the corners, with square edges missing here and there. The light that came shining in when the elevator door opened was a relief. Moreover, my room on the fourth floor was much cleaner than I expected; it had a fake yet clean wooden floor, and was furnished with a
small television, air conditioner, bed, and small refrigerator that all looked new. I later had a chance to visit my co-workers’ rooms in the four story walk up building, which made me feel sorry for them; when my co-workers visited my room, they were eager to move in to this building instead.

After I loaded my belongings onto the bed, I hurried back to the front lobby. By the time we finished the short tour of the complex, including the community bath, cafeteria, game corner, snack shop, laundry space, coffee shop, and front office, it was already past 7 pm. I was hungry, so I headed towards the cafeteria with two others who seemed to be up for eating. I had the Set B, which was under 300 yen and consisted of curry rice with a small salad and miso soup. The curry was thick yet void of taste, the miso soup watery.

We ate in near silence. One worker, a tall young man with damaged brown hair, left his seat with a short “See you” as soon as he finished eating. I was left with the older man, whom I would later come to know in more detail, and so I started to chat. After we finished eating, we strolled around the snack shop and walked outside to go buy cigarettes. Although I was a bit tired, I wanted to breathe the outside air before I headed back to that dormitory room. As we began to walk, we noticed that the dormitory complex was built on a hill, from which a steep slope led towards town. We had been planning to check out the nearest train station, where we assumed we would find some stores, but stopped midway for not wanting to climb up the hill on our way back. I asked the man if he was willing to visit town tomorrow, since our work didn’t begin until Monday. I had some shopping to do, and I also wanted to get to know this man.
We agreed to meet at noon, and I headed back to my dorm and opened the little encouragement package. In it was a thin aluminum skillet, cup noodles of a brand I had never heard of, three sets of disposable wooden chop sticks, a small shampoo and rinse without a brand name, hand towels (medium and small); a roll of toilet paper, and a plastic cup. My days as a factory temporary agency worker had thus begun.

**Summary**

In this chapter, using data gathered from participant observation and in-depth interviews, I examined the process of job placement and entry into factory temping, outlining the structural characteristics of factory temp work and their manufactured appeals. I argued that finding factory temp work is akin to satisfying hunger at a fast-food joint. The structural attributes that attract job seekers into choosing factory temp work as a full-time job are the job’s availability, the ease of access, the speed of employment, and the allures of additional benefits that come with the job such as advance loans and dormitory housing. Temp agencies negotiate the various demands made by their clients, ranging from “anyone will do” to specific requests for qualified experience and skills. They also make business decisions in striking a balance between spending resources to select quality workers and dispatching any worker they can find as soon as possible. The clients’ intent to use workers (be they unskilled or skilled) on their shop floors at a lesser cost than directly hiring workers on their own is mediated by the temp agencies’ attempt to make their own profits. The consequence is a low hurdle set by the temp agencies in recruiting workers, which results in making the job accessible to job seekers excluded from good permanent jobs.
In the previous chapter, I have discussed the manufactured appeal of factory temp work. This chapter examines the conditions awaiting the workers once they enter into the factories as temp workers. I analyze one of the structural logics that dominate the shop floor to which fresh temp workers must respond to and learn to manage in order to survive on the job. The primary rule in factory temping is the logic of survival of the fittest. Once user clients receive the temp workers freshly dispatched from the temp agencies, they put them through a sieve. Because these temp workers are arbitrarily selected by the temp agencies, they are a hodge-podge of workers with diverse background, of various ages, with unexamined aptitude for factory work. User clients put these freshly dispatched workers on what can be characterized as an informal trial period. User clients conduct their own selection in weeding out the subpar performers. Some large companies hold a short “training period” where workers listen to lectures and participate in practice drills. Many smaller factories place freshly dispatched workers immediately on the line from Day 1 and test their aptitude on the job while casting a careful eye upon their performance. Temps who failed to demonstrate the capacity to work up to the standards of the user client were quickly removed and replaced by another temp worker who then went through the same shakedown process.

Clients and temp agencies collaborate together in this shakedown. Temp agencies are aware that the first few weeks are the most insecure period of the job. Agents are prepared to bring in a replacement for the workers who were judged as unsatisfactory by the factory management. Not passing the shakedown, commonly referred to as “NG”
(standing for “no-good”) in the Japanese context, is “an everyday matter,” according to Araki, a former agent in the business for fourteen years, whose job included executing the client’s request for a replacement. Although temp workers’ employment is unstable, the threat of dismissal is more acute during the initial shakedown period. Whereas directly hired, permanent employees are carefully selected before entering the workplace and receive job training given the assumption of a lifetime employment, temp workers are expected to contribute immediately with minimal training. Whether one had a college degree or was a taxi driver formerly did not matter. Temp workers were purely judged based on their performance.

If temp workers failed to give what the clients demanded, the user client could simply call the temp agency representative and ask for a replacement, which is the benefit for clients of using temporary agencies. From the workers’ standpoint, it is this flexibility that unleashed the survival game. Hence, for the temp workers, the job was less of an issue of entry. The bigger challenge was after entry, to survive on the job where the logic of survival of the fittest dominated. The world of factory temp work was a competitive game, especially during the initial shakedown period when the management weeded out subpar performers.

Two-Day Training Session

Monday August 4th was the first day of work. It was also our first day that was paid. Temp workers newly dispatched from all of the temp agencies the user client was in business with were gathered together to go through a two-day training session, which was called the “Haken Shain Ukeire Kyōiku,” or Dispatch Employee Admission Education.
In hindsight, the two days functioned as a screening measure where a hodge-podge of temp workers from all walks of life are separated into the “wanted” and “unwanted” temp workers. Trainers from the auto maker disciplined and tested the temp workers by having us go through lectures and hands-on physical drills. Agents from respective temp agencies were present throughout the two-day training session. They stood by the wall, watching their employees listen to the lectures and sweat through the drills. These agents have seen numerous workers go through the same shakedown. During the break, these agents privately walked up to the employees who they thought were drawing unwanted attention from the trainer. If any worker did not meet the auto maker’s standard, the trainer informed the agent present, and then the agent pulled out the worker no longer wanted by the client. The worker immediately disappeared from the sessions. The evaluation criteria were not made objectively clear to the workers. Moreover, it was not announced to the temp workers that the “training session” served as a weeding out process, that one can lose the job on that very day. However, the workers present began to reach a clear understanding of the function of the training session as they listened to the authoritarian trainers reprimand workers and saw them disappear when they returned from a break.

The first day of training was to begin at 8am. The agent had informed us the day before that the agency’s shuttle bus was going to take us to the factory from the dormitory. The assemble time was at 6:40am, and the bus left the dormitory five minutes after. The air in the bus was sleepy and nervous. The ten or so workers were in their casual clothes, sitting in their respective seats looking out the window in silence. No one was talking to each other. On the bus, the AM radio sounded clear. The radio host
announced the week’s events: August 6th is Hiroshima, 8th is the opening day of the Beijing Olympics, 9th is Nagasaki, 11th is the elimination date of North Korea as state sponsor of terrorism as determined by the United States. I watched the unfamiliar sight from the window as the scene continuously came and went. It felt this world confined in this bus was detached from the rest of the world’s events to come. Wakita (2008) argues that one of the characteristics of temporary agency work is isolation. By hopping from one workplace to another in search for employment, they become quasi-migrant workers, uprooting themselves from their hometown and moving into an unfamiliar place. The insecure nature of temp work leads them to repeat this process of uprooting and momentarily transplanting themselves to a new town. Ties to the local town and workplace are severed every time they move. Isolation is created by repeating this process.

The sun had risen high by the time the bus arrived at the factory around 7:20. The bus passed by a security gate where the agent and the guard exchanged the morning greetings. The bus drove by an open space that looked like a stadium parking lot where commuters parked their cars. As we stepped off the bus in a corner parking lot surrounded by two to three story high square buildings, the agents handed us a work uniform, a cap, safety shoes, and a large plastic bag. We followed the agents into the gymnasium, a typical indoor facility made for exercise and assembly with a podium in front and basketball hoops on the walls. The entrance floor was already filled with numerous shoes. Inside the gym, workers from other temp agencies and their agents had already arrived. Some were changing into their uniforms while others were in their work outfit standing around. No one had a cheerful face. None was chatting either. We were
instructed to change into the work uniforms and put all our belongings in the plastic bag. We silently walked towards the wall of the gym and changed our clothes. The work wear was a red long sleeve polo shirt with the auto maker’s logo printed on the chest. The pants were grey. Temp workers were provided the same work uniform as the directly hired employees of the client company. We were asked to bring our own belt. The cap also printed the client’s logo in front. I was already beginning to sweat in this full long-sleeve suit in a muggy gym, and I could see other people developing dark spots on their back as well.

The head trainer from the auto maker was a cleanly shaved middle-aged man, wearing silver rimmed glasses, with his hair neatly parted on the side. He came walking in to the gym wearing the same colored polo shirt, the only difference was that the color was a nicely washed out red symbolic of a veteran worker in addition to it being a short-sleeve. Our agent nudged us to walk closer to him, and a half circle surrounded the head trainer with a strange distance maintained. He had a clipboard in his hand, and began to call out names lumped together by the temp agencies. He handed out a numbered label as he called out our names, told us to attach it to our chest and line up in the numerical order. I was “No. 9.” That was my identity. All of the workers in their brand new wrinkled clothes were lined up in neat rows. Now in uniforms and caps, each worker had less distinction from one another. He then said, “Alright. Let’s begin…‘Good morning!’” Everyone failed to respond to this sudden shout of the morning greeting. I believe many of us knew what was expected of us by this head trainer. We all learned to yell our greetings in primary and secondary schools in response to a demand by the authority. But it seemed many of the workers were caught by surprise on the first day at an auto factory.
Everyone barely managed to murmur out their good mornings. This could have been the very first moment for some of us to utter the first word for that day. As if the chief trainer had expected our mumbling, he then said with a smirk, “Let’s do it again…‘Good morning!’” The workers managed to say their greetings louder this time.

We then were asked to spread out, extending our arms so that none of us would be touching each other. It was time for a radio exercise without the radio tune. The chief trainer, whose name we were never told, served as the caller to the radio exercise. It had been over ten years since I last did my radio exercise. I was surprised to know that my body remembered the routine.

Next came what I now call the Salutation Drill. The chief trainer lectured the legion of temps in a loud voice that there are important salutations in this factory that should be ingrained in every worker’s head. The salutations to remember take the initials of “O-A-Shi-Su (Japanese pronunciation of oasis)”: Ohayōgozaimasu, Arigatōgozaimasu, Shitsureishimasu, Sumimasendeshita, which are respectively honorific expressions for good morning, thank you, excuse me, and I am sorry. He told us to memorize these four salutations. He lectured in great length the significance of being able to offer proper greetings and salutations. He told us that it is only when one is able to offer these salutations that he or she become true adults and thus can become a valuable, full-fledged member of society. He told us in his now familiar smirk that since all of us seem to be well-experienced adults, do offer these greetings clearly and definitively. He continued on to note that inside the factory, it is very noisy, and people cannot hear you if you mumble. If you want to person to hear you, you need to shout it out.
We then were asked to come up to the front and shout out the four great salutations. Each worker, from “No. 1” on, took turns in walking up to the front, taking the cap off, and shouting out the salutations to the corps of workers. The corps were instructed to shout back the salutations. When my turn came, I walked up to the half court line and shouted out to everyone, “My name is Shinji Kojima, from Y Temp Agency. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu!”

Everyone then responded, “Yoroshiku onegaishimasu!”

I shouted, “Ohayōgozaimasu!” and the group shouted back at me,

“Ohayōgozaimasu!”
“Arigatogozaimasu!”
“Arigatogozaimasu!”
“Shitsureishimasu!”
“Shitsureishimasu!”
“Sumimasendeshita!”
“Sumimasendeshita!”

The trainer had every individual come up to the front and do their shouting. Most workers finished the drill without a problem. Some dragged their feet walking up front with a rebellious expression on their faces. A few were somewhat shy and blushed when they faced the group. A few panicked and stumbled a little in remembering the four salutations.

All during this time, agents from respective temp agencies stood by the wall in the back with their premise admission pass dangling from their neck. Agents were distinguished from each other by the jacket they were wearing that had the temp agency color and logo printed. They watched from the sideline as their staffs responded to the orders of the chief trainer and went through the morning exercise routine and salutation drills. When everyone finished shouting their salutations, the trainer told us to reassemble outside the gym in our safety shoes. As we were released and walked towards the exit
with our brand new safety shoes in hand, one of the agent came up to Adachi, a fellow
temp worker in his early forties walking along with me towards the exit and said, “Is
there something wrong? You need to show some enthusiasm. Come on now. Give it all
you got!” The agent was trying to pump energy into Adachi, whose voice seemed a little
faint when he was supposed to shout out the salutations. He was also several steps off
during the radio exercise. The trainer held a clip board presumably with every
individual’s name on it. He watched the workers do the radio exercise and the salutations,
scribbling down something on the board, which gave an air of anxiety and strain to the

group. It was at this moment that I, and presumably many others as well, came to the
understanding that these drills are not simply a military-like disciplinary training but are
means of evaluating the new workers. Agents whose job is partly to bring in bus-loads of
workers have seen numerous fresh workers go through the screening process. They knew
who were likely not to make this first cut. And it is through this nudging and advising
during short breaks that agents attempt to get as many of their staffs to survive the
weeding-out process as possible.

Outside the gym under the hot sun, we went through a safety drill, learning how
to use a fire extinguisher. In our long sleeves, pants, and straight-edged caps that still
need a bit more wear to fit our heads, the rookie workers listened to another lecture about
the danger of fire in a factory and how to respond to it. The trainer instructed us to yell
“Fire!” as the first thing to do when we encounter a situation of fire. And then we were
instructed to take swift steps towards the fire until we are in a two to three meter range
from the fire. We then pull out the safety pin from the fire extinguisher, hold the hose,
and aim at the root of the fire. We were grouped into four, and took turns shouting out
“Fire!,” moving towards a short tree with a practice extinguisher in hand, and squirting water at its root.

After the fire drill, we returned to the gym to grab our belongings and entered the next door building into an air-conditioned office room with desks and chairs lined up in a classroom style with a white board in front. Until lunch, we watched video tapes and listened to lectures about the auto maker, including a brief history and introduction of the main plants of the company and the cars being manufactured. Before he pressed the “Play” button, he gave a wordy, disciplinary speech.

Right now, other workers are sweating hard on the assembly line while we are in here sitting comfortably in an air-conditioned room. You are consuming when others are producing. So do not sit in your chairs with a student mind-set. This is no play. This is work. Paid work. I am not here being paid by all of you to give a lecture. We are paying you for these two days.

And then he went on to note with a sarcastic grin that it was not the new foreign management alone that brought this auto maker back to its feet but rather it was the sweat and tears of every single worker on the shop floor.

Everybody is sweating right now. Some of you may have experience working with cars. Some may even have various licenses that make you a qualified worker elsewhere. But, that does not matter here. Forget about all those qualifications from your past life. You are all here wearing the work-wear we provided. Once you are in those outfits, you are the worker of X (name of the auto maker). You are the X man. Please work as such.

We watched a video that reviewed all the plants owned by the auto maker and some of the key associated companies, explaining which plants were making what. As the video moved on to explaining the organizational chart of the factory we are to work for, the trainer suddenly chastised a young worker who was sitting close to the window dosing off. After we returned from a short break, we found the seat of this individual emptied,
another sure sign that this was a screening process that immediately sent home unwanted workers.

After a short break, the trainer went through the safety measures in detail. He repeatedly used the word “hyōjun (standard)” to refer to the standardized work routine. He made this single point clear: remain within the standardized procedure in order to avoid injuries. Injuries happen when workers work outside the manual. Room for improvisation was eliminated from the rookies. In case anything beyond the standardized manual occurs, stop the line, call the superintendent, and wait for instructions. We were repeatedly warned not to make judgments and act on our own. He then went on to lecture on the significance of keeping the shop floor organized and clean, which helps avoid injury. He also mentioned that Japanese auto makers are competing in the global market based on product quality. He told us that Japanese auto makers are outcompeted by others in terms of labor cost; ten Chinese workers can be employed with a single Japanese workers’ wage. In order to survive in such a tight market, auto makers must compete by producing high quality goods. And quality product means quality workers. It is the high quality of workers that make possible the production of high quality products, which is the purpose of this education and training session. He said it is his job to bring all of us up to the level that meets the standard in practice on their assembly line.

From the afternoon began a grueling physical drill. If I knew, I would have taken in more water during lunch. Outside of the lecture room was an open space where ten to twelve practice kits were laid out. Each kit constituted of a large, three feet wide empty box with dividers that created a four-by-three space that was numbered from 1 to 11. This empty box was laid on a table. On the floor was a blue plastic pallet about one foot larger
than the size of the box. On top of the pallet were laid 11 different auto parts, such as a rolled up seat belt and a jack. The heaviest was a wheel. We were randomly paired with another worker and assigned to one practice kit. Each of us was also given a pair of cotton work gloves. The number of trainers had increased to four or five, now with a timer hanging from their necks and a clip board in their hands. As I was trying to make sense of what was going to now happen, the chief trainer announced to us in his smirk face that we are now going to sweat a little bit. The drill was simple: to pick up an auto part on the pallet in the order from number 1, and place it in the empty box where it is numbered as 1. We were to repeat this pick and place routine from number 1 to number 11. After all auto parts are placed into the box, we were to pop in ten plastic screw-like objects into a metal frame attached to the box using our hands, and then take all ten screws off the frame using a screw driver and place them all back into the pallet. After that, we reverse the process by picking up each auto part from the box and unloading each item back on to the pallet where it belonged, starting with Number 11 and working back up to Number 1. Going one full circle, every item was supposed to be back on the pallet where it originally was. It was a simple, repetitive task. However, the idea was to balance speed and care. We had to rush, as all of us were timed by the now increased number of trainers. We also were told to handle each item with care by using both hands and never banging the items into the table or the frame of the box. The pair was to take turns. The rest time was when one’s partner was working on the routine.

The workers went through the drill once to experience and understand the process of picking and placing. I felt a strain in my back for having to bend over the large palette to reach out and pick up the parts that were placed farthest away using both hands. I was
not supposed to step on to the pallet. The iron wheel was heavier than I thought as well. The trainers walked around the islands of workers and instructed them whenever they noticed anomalies, i.e. that was not “hyōjun (standard),” such as not using both hands, not picking up the plastic caps they dropped on the floor, or placing the parts differently (crooked angle or up-side down) from the original layout. We took turns and repeated the drill about three times. I was already in heavy sweat in the still, muggy air, and so was my partner. After the practice run, we went through a full thirty minute run of this drill. We shouted, “Rotate!” when each of us finished the routine and called in our partner to do his. The air of the entire group of workers was serious and competitive, in a sense signaling to each other how fast they could yell out the “Rotate!” The chief trainer, who seemed to be happy with the serious engagement by the workers, told the heavy-breathing crowd that what is important is not how fast we finish the picking and placing but to finish the set of task within the designated time frame and to keep that pace throughout the day. He told us that we need to finish the single round of picking and placing within 1 minute and 18 seconds. Before we were released for a ten minute break, he announced that after we come back from the break, each trainer is going to go around and time us officially. So they did. “Ready, start!”

The trainers spent a good time at each island, watching each worker carefully while he ran his drill. The trainers stood right by, timing us from the start to finish. It did not feel good to have these trainers come to our island one after another with their arms crossed, watching me sweat to bend over the pallet repeatedly to pick up the parts and place them in the box one after another only to undo what I have just done. The trainers scribbled something, presumably time and maybe something more, on to the clipboard,
and moved on. If they had an issue with you, they warned you quietly. In my case, I was instructed to use both hands when picking up the part. I was getting aggravated with the whole situation. Orders were being barked at the workers without a sense of respect. Every one of the workers arrived this morning with individuality and a unique biography, which was diminished by the uniform caps and the words of our trainers into a group of rookie temps with numbers attached to their chest. I also found it silly being forced to carry a roll of seatbelt using both hands as if carrying a little rabbit while being told to meet a short time frame. The fact that I was reprimanded, and had no choice but to follow the trainer’s reprimand made me blush. Meanwhile the trainers on the ground cautioned us with gleaming eyes, the head trainer stood on what looked like a crate, yelling at us from an elevated position, “Don’t bang the parts into the box!” “Hurry up, or you won’t make it in time!” During the very first round of the timed drill, when everyone began to work on popping in the plastic screw into the metal frame, many dropped them on to the floor while hurriedly trying to pop them in. It was indeed hard to work on this task wearing cotton gloves that stuck with the plastic screws. Hearing the screws being dropped at islands everywhere caused a giggle among the workers. The chief trainer was quick to extinguish the only humor found among the workers for the day and yelled, “This is no child’s play! Get serious!”

The timed drill lasted for forty minutes, which was repeated twice. The final drill lasted for fifty minutes. My paired worker who appeared to be young and muscular was dripping sweat from his chin as he bent over to pick up parts. While my partner was working on his turn, I looked around to see how other workers were doing. There was a worker who looked less physically fit. He was sweating profusely and his glasses were
fogged. He was gasping for air with a grimace on his face. The drill tested the workers both physically and mentally. Not only that the workers had to demonstrate physical durability but also the mental tolerability in repeating motions accurately for an extended period of time.

During the drill, I sensed an air of competition amongst the workers. The word “Rotate!” was shouted by the workers proudly as if grasping the opportunity to present themselves as capable workers against other workers as well as to the trainers. The workers were placed in a context where we raced against each other. There was no mercy shown towards one another in finishing the routine as fast as one can to hand over the task to the partner. The islands were set so close to each other that sometimes our bodies bumped into each other. Even at those moments, no words of apology or the salutations that we have just learned to shout out were given. We all continued hustling in silence with a competitive edge against each other. Each worker was working hard on the drill as if to display his competency over others. In the context of survival of the fittest, workers were driving each other into a fanatic scene of diligence and competition. Even during the short ten minute break, workers appeared to be careful not to show signs of fatigue. No one made a move to share their exhaustion, presumably not wanting to display an image of an incompetent worker leading to no job.

As the group ended the day’s session, the head trainer proudly told the workers that this routine that we repeated for only several sessions of forty to fifty minutes today lasts the entire day in the factory. He also made it clear that those who were cautioned today were acting on their own, which meant working outside of the standardized manual. He said, “Again, do not work outside the standardized routine.” He then closed the day
by giving us homework. He told us to show up tomorrow with the three principles of 
safety memorized in addition to the “O-A-Shi-Su” salutations. He then grumbled that 
some freshmen don’t even care to remember these simply safety admonitions. He said,

Don’t fool around with me. Money does not come falling from the sky. You need 
to earn it. You all are being paid, so do your work. Rights and responsibility. 
There are idiots who only care to demand their rights without fulfilling their 
responsibility. I can’t stand them.

As I was walking over to the shuttle bus with Adachi and Sato, my fellow temp 
workers from the same agency, our agent walked over to us and asked Adachi if he could 
have a moment with him. Sato and I left the two and boarded the bus. We looked out the 
window from the bus as the two spoke in private. Sato spoke in a low voice that Adachi 
was probably going to be released. Looking into my face, Sato continued on to note that 
he oversaw Adachi working the pick-and-place drill several pairs away from him. I could 
not see either Adachi or Sato during the drill since they were working on the opposite 
side of the table with large boxes blocking my view. But Sato had a good view of Adachi 
working. He said Adachi was receiving warnings repeatedly from the trainers. Sato had 
temped at other factories before coming here, and he was familiar with the shakedown 
process and the survival tactics required of workers.

Kojima: So…was he slow?
Sato: Yeah, he was. But, it’s not only that. I don’t think it’s that much of a 
problem to be slow…How should I say it…he didn’t seem to be giving all 
he’s got.
Kojima: …You mean, he wasn’t sweating the drill?
Sato: No… Even I got the impression that he wasn’t giving his best. I know he’s 
sort of laid back and you can’t tell what he is thinking from the moony 
expression he always has on his face.
Kojima: Yeah, I notice he is…not so snappy.
Sato: But you have to show them that you are working hard and that you are listening and understand what they say, especially when they come around and warn you.

I recalled the agent walking over to Adachi in the morning telling him to display more energy after watching him during the radio exercise and salutation shouting. It was not only Sato and I who were watching the agent talk to Adachi; all those who were waiting on the bus were watching, perhaps being able to tell what was just happening. Adachi did not make the cut. A gloomy air filled the bus, watching an individual failing to secure work on the first day after going through the exhaustive drills and wordy lectures. This phenomenon was called “NG” which stood for “no good.” The user client, in this case represented by the trainers from the auto maker, identifies an unwanted worker and informs the responsible agent to withdraw the unfit worker from the shop floor. The agents are responsible for pulling out the worker. The agency then makes the decision of whether to introduce another workplace elsewhere and begin a new employment contract with the worker or to completely do away with the worker without any further work introduction.

I can still recall the silence that permeated the bus when Adachi came back and boarded the bus. Adachi walked through the narrow aisle towards Sato and I, and told us as he sat down that he did not make it. I asked him what he meant, being at a loss for words. He said the agent told him to be on stand-by in his dorm room for tomorrow.

The bus then began to make a full round of picking up a few workers from the same temp agency already working on a shift. These workers carried an air of pride when they boarded the bus full of rookies whose worth was yet to be tested. These workers sat in the front row together with the agents without looking at us in the back. No salutations
either. They presented an image of a capable worker, who has the physical toughness to come out of a full day of work with energy remaining for more, and the affinity built with the agents to chat with them in a jolly tone with smiles and laughter, while the rest of us were completely exhausted on our first day at work. The image these seasoned temp workers presented to the rookies was that of “this is where you want to be (this is the level you want to reach),” which was in stark contrast with Adachi who had just been released.

It was close to 7 pm when the bus arrived at the dormitory complex. The required work time of the day was over twelve hours, whereas the paid hours were counted as eight hours. I quickly finished my dinner at the cafeteria and took a quick bath. Before I crashed into bed, I placed my sweat-drained work wear into the laundry machine since those were the only work clothes handed to us.

Day Two

The shuttle bus departed at 6:40 am and arrived at the factory at 7:20 am. My inner thigh muscle ached when boarding the bus. After changing into our work wear, we still had time so many of us found seats and began to smoke. I sat next to a man from the same temp agency with whom I still had not talked. Murata told me he had worked at a factory in Shizuoka prefecture owned by one of the biggest electronics maker before coming here. He did not like the work shift there thus requested a transfer to this factory.

The same head trainer from yesterday arrived in his red short-sleeve polo shirt with his clip board in hand. We headed outside today and did our silent radio exercise. Then came the salutation shouting drill. He tested if we had done our homework from
yesterday: to memorize the *Oashisu*. Before we took turns shouting the salutations, the trainer told us to state our salutations loudly, clearly, and without mistake. The unlucky one who was picked to step up first stumbled a little, but everyone managed to shout out the salutations. We then moved into the lecture room to leave our luggage. As such started our second training/screening session, the day I was handed down the “NG” and released from work.

As we entered the lecture room, Murata, with whom I briefly talked for the first time that morning, told the trainer that the air conditioner was a little too strong for him. We all looked at him, and his designated seat was at the very back of the classroom right in front of the industrial-size air conditioner. No wonder he felt a little cold. In response, the trainer said “Well then, let’s stop the AC.” Murata was caught by surprise and respectfully told the trainer he was not asking him to entirely shutting down the AC and that he wished to ask others’ opinions before doing so. The trainer responded with his familiar sarcasm that since there is no AC on the assembly line we might as well get used to it now. He went on to turn off the AC, which made the lecture room completely silent. After the trainer spoke verbosely for the next thirty minutes, he began to sweat, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. Presumably no longer being able to stand the humidity building up in the classroom, he said, “It’s getting kind of hot, isn’t it?” and walked over to the air conditioner in the back to turn it on again. In an interview, I had a chance to exchange opinions with Sato on the trainer’s authoritarian behavior. Sato said,

If I can get what I am here for, how they treat us isn’t really important, from our standpoint as a temp… Like today’s trainer, I listen to what I have to, and that will get me through the day. Once I’m in, it all becomes irrelevant… I can care less as long as I get what I need.
These temp workers have arrived at this factory, some making a long journey away from their hometown, to secure a job. And they remain obedient and follow the routine to get what they need, i.e., a job, even when the trainers at times display an unreasonably authoritarian attitude.

The trainer picked an individual to tell him what the three safety principles were. That was another homework he gave us yesterday. The worker who was picked succeeded in answering the first rule but could not squeeze out the rest. The trainer chose another worker who again failed to answer the rest of the two principles. The trainer then went on to another prolonged nagging about our lack of diligence.

Listen. If you all cannot answer, that means you were not listening to yesterday’s lecture. Education and training is on a continuum from yesterday. There is no break between yesterday and today’s session. Here, we do not offer education that is irrelevant. We are talking about fundamental rules and principles, so please have them memorized. It is you who get injured for not having memorized the principles. Cars can be fixed when broken, but an arm cut off cannot be fixed.

He then moved on to ask what we were supposed to do when anything occurred beyond the standardized procedure. A chubby worker sitting in the back who was breathing hard during yesterday’s drill could not answer. Sato sitting in front of me raised his hands and answered, “Stop, Call, and Wait.”

After a lecture on environmental protection measures, we moved on to a new drill. The trainer explained to us the significance of the Standard Operation Manual and the operation procedures outlined in the manual. Using powerpoint slides, he showed us that there are several versions of this manual, from the brief, simplified version to the extensively detailed version. He said that for a country like Japan without natural resources to win the global competition, not only that we need to advance technology but
to also maintain consistent quality. Following the standardized manual is indispensable in maintaining product quality. He said, “Those who obey the law and act with courtesy are called adults. Those who can work according to the standardized manual are called ichinin-mae. (full adults)” Standard Operation Manual exists to ensure consistent practice on the assembly line, which leads to maintaining product quality, predictable cost, meeting the turnaround time, and minimizing injuries on the job. It is a way to not cause mura, muda, and muri (irregularity/inconsistency, excess/waste, and overstrain). The manual also enables any given worker to complete the task, as long as the workers learn to follow the manual word for word. He went on to explain that written instructions have made it possible for a fresh-on-the-line worker to engage the task even at the absence of a senior worker. He then repeated the point he made yesterday that product quality is intricately linked to worker quality. Product quality improves with care, so give yourself to the job with a devoted wish to provide our valued customers (“okyakusama”) with quality cars.

We then stepped outside of the lecture room to do an assembly drill using a Standard Operation Manual. The same open space where we ran the pick-and-place drill yesterday had long tables aligned to a makeshift assembly line. We were divided into groups of five, and each worker was given a laminated operation manual for his respective work position. Each of us at his respective position had a task to complete. By completing our responsible tasks, and then handing it over to the next man down the line, the line has made a fuel vapor canister module. As we took our position, we silently read our operation manual. In front of me was a tray full of spring clamps, a box of snaky rubber tubes, a plate with water in it, a blue plastic piece to be used as a measure, and
small silver pliers. On the left hand side of the table, which was the upstream end of the line, there was a taped area the trainers called the temporary placement box. In the space was already placed a canister with tubes sticking out of it. The series of operations began by picking it up and placing it in front of me in the work area. When I was done, I was to place it to my right, which is another temporary placement box the worker working to my right reaches out to work on his assigned operation.

I was assigned the second position among the five-member assembly line with the following work steps. First, take the canister from the temporary placement box and place the canister in front of myself in the working area. Take the pliers and pinch the clamp on the tube already attached to the canister and slide the clamp over to the valve of the canister so that it pinches the tube to the canister. Then I use the plastic piece to measure if the clamp is correctly placed within the 3 plus-minus 1 millimeter range from the end of the tube. I also make sure that the butterfly-like pinching edge of the clamp sits on top of the yellow line drawn on the rubber tube. I was then to grab one plastic tube from the box, find the end marked with white, and place a new clamp on it using the pliers. I then wet the white end of the tube with water, and stick it in the open valve of the canister. I then use the pliers again to slide the clamp over to the valve end of the tube so that it pinches the valve within the 3 plus-minus 1 millimeter range from the end of the tube. Before I place the canister to the temporary placement box to my right, I check the “Vital Points (Kyūsho)” noted on the Standard Operation Manual. It lists the critical points of the task to be given special attention. First, I must make sure that I inserted the curvy tube from the end marked in white and not from the other end. I must also see that the tube is inserted deep enough into the valve. In addition, I must measure the distance of the clamp
using the blue plastic chip to see if I had the clamp pinch the tube onto the valve within
the 3 plus-minus 1 millimeter range so as to not cause leakage. The final check point is to
place the pinching edge of the clamp on the yellow mark on the tube so that the clamp
does not interfere with other parts assembled around the canister. After checking all the
Vital Points, I finally let go of my canister and place it to my right.

The trainer went around each group to demonstrate each task. When he came over
to our line, he had us read out loud the operation instructions printed on the manual. He
then read us back the instruction out loud as he showed how each task is to be done. I was
so intently watching him work the task that I lost my place in the printed manual when it
was my turn to read the instructions out loud. As I was eyeing my manual to find where I
left off, the trainer who was slouched over the table waiting for the next task to be read
shouted, “Next instruction! Hurry up!”

After the trainer showed each of us how each operation was to be done, we all
returned to our positions and slowly practiced the task. Just like yesterday, there were
about four to five trainers with timers hanging from their neck with a clipboard in their
hands. After a ten minute self practice session, we moved ahead to a timed drill. “Re-
ady, Go!”

I heard the tingling sound of the pliers busily at work, and clamps dropping on to
the floor. “Come on! Speed it up! We have a turnaround time to meet! Our valued
customers are waiting! They are waiting for their cars to arrive before the summer break!
At your speed, the customers are never going to receive their cars!” The physical fatigue
was hardly close to the intensity of yesterday’s drill, but it was the pressure of time while
working on something that required a certain level of dexterity that was difficult. The
resulting discomfort that I felt was something similar to being edged up from behind by a huge trailer truck on a freeway. The ten minute drill produced a meager number of completed modules. While many were wiping their sweat off their foreheads, the trainer counted the completed canisters and told us in his grinning face, “This is about half of what must be completed.” We ran another ten-minute practice drill. The pressure to hurry not only came from the trainers, but from other workers as well. There was a subtle yet sure sense of competition among the workers, as I felt during the drill yesterday. Workers worked as fast as they could and filled up the temporary placement table with canisters. By completing the task faster than the person downstream, one increased the number of canisters waiting to be worked on, which was a visible sign of competency.

After a ten minute break, we moved on to the live drill where trainers went around each worker to observe and time the performance. The trainers yelled in hyped up intensity, fueling the commotion of the floor. We ran a ten-minute drill twice. As was the case yesterday, trainers came around each individual, stood there and watched, and then jotted down something on to their clipboards. When a trainer came over to observe and time me, I was warned once. I was not using the blue plastic chip to physically measure if the clamp was sitting on the 3 plus-minus 1 millimeter range from the tube’s end. I was checking the position of the clamp with my eyes when I slid it to the valve end on the tube, and I deemed it a redundant step to have to lay down my pliers, pick up the blue chip, and place it at the end of the tube to only confirm that I had it correct. The trainer saw me skip that Vital Point to be checked. He told me in a soft tone, “Hey, you need to use this (pointing at the blue chip) and confirm.” After I was warned, I submissively did
as told, to go through every Vital Point before handing the canister over to the next person.

After another ten minute break, the trainer told us to memorize the Vital Points. We were given about five minutes, and then he went around to have each one of us speak them out. Sato failed to memorize the points. I managed to memorize them and speak it out. After the memorization exam, we moved on to cleaning the drill area with mops and brooms. As if we were aware that the cleaning process is being watched and graded as well, everybody went seriously at the cleaning without any chatting. No one fooled around. After a good twenty minutes or so of cleaning, we returned to the classroom to hear the announcement that we were now off to lunch break. Before he released us, he said once we come back from lunch, we will be taken to our respective positions in the factory and will be handed over to the line leaders. This marked the end of the training/screening session.

I ate lunch together with Sato and a former McDonald’s branch manager from Hokkaido. The branch was closed down due to low sales, and he decided to give this factory temp job a try instead of working for another McDonald’s branch. He has a wife and an infant child that he left behind in his home town. While we were back in the training facility smoking our cigarette, the temp agent came over to us and asked myself and another worker named Chiba if we could talk in private. Chiba was a tall, skinny man in his late twenties who has been hopping temp work. We were told in a round-about way that we failed to pass the screening. He said in an apologetic tone, “It seems things didn’t work out for the two of you…”
I was astonished, and disappointed. I had to confirm. “What? So you mean I can’t work here?”

“That was what I was told…”

This hurt my sense of self-worth. I saw many who were working slower than I was. I was able to withstand the physically draining drills. There were many others who were apparently not the physically athletic type, sweating hard and breathing with their shoulders. I had never failed to memorize what I was told to, when others could not recite them. I managed to make myself as articulate as others in shouting my salutations. How can this be? As many thoughts swirled in my head, being momentarily at a loss for words, the agent was quick to tell us, “But we won’t abandon you. There is a right place for every one of us. Just because you didn’t make it here doesn’t mean you are no good. [Name of the auto maker] is one of the toughest and the most selective.”

I was only half listening while the agent kept on trying to cheer up the two of us. I had not expected to be rejected. This was a matter of research as well. I went through the job interviews, and then came all the way out here to a foreign land carrying my belongings in a backpack, persevered through the nagging lectures by the trainer, and the physically draining drills. I assumed I was doing well, yet was being asked to leave. Not only that rejection did not feel good, my fieldwork was facing a crisis of coming to a halt. What am I to do from here? The agent then said,

Don’t take this too negatively… If you are now thinking, ‘screw you’ and no longer wish to work with us, I won’t hold you back. But if you wish to still find work through us, we won’t abandon you. In fact, we have an appointment set up for you at the [neighboring town] branch office. The appointment is tomorrow at 10am. We have work ready for you.
I was again caught by surprise. I am being released just now, and there is another job waiting for me tomorrow? Assuming that the agent had been given a list of “NG” workers by the trainer while we went to lunch, he had already set up an appointment within an hour? Sensing a stream of light shine in to this dark picture of an end to my fieldwork, I asked the agent, “So…what was wrong about me here?” The agent did not have an answer. He said, “I am not sure…I thought you were just fine.”

Still not satisfied, after the temp agent told us to go gather our belongings, I stopped by the chief trainer who was slouching on the chair smoking and confabulating with the workers who had managed to secure work. I asked him politely, “What did I do wrong?” He stopped chatting and briefly glanced at me at the corner of his eyes and said, “Don’t ask me. It was a collective decision made by all the trainers.” That was it. So I left.

Chiba and I were pulled out of the group and taken to a locker room downstairs where we changed to our own everyday clothing. We returned the sweat-drenched outfit and safety shoes to the agent who drove us back to the dorm. While we were changing, Chiba said, “This is depressing….” Silence permeated the van during the 30 minute drive back to the dormitory. I was thinking about two things: What led me to being kicked out? How to proceed with my fieldwork from here? After moments of thinking, I came to the temporary conclusion that it was possibly due to not following the procedure outlined in the Standard Operation Manual. I was given a warning twice during the two-day shakedown. Once was the first day for not using both of my hands to pick up the auto parts when the instruction was to use both hands. The second warning was for not using the blue plastic chip to measure the distance of the clamp from the edge of the tube, which was also about transgressing the standardized work routine. I was not working as
instructed. It was not a matter of speed. I was fast enough not to be warned. It was not failing to memorize the Vital Points or shout out the salutations. I had it all right. Rather, it was because I was not following orders. But I could only guess. Neither the temp agent nor the trainer was open enough to inform me.

As we got off the van, the agent told us to just relax for today and show up to the appointment set up for tomorrow’s visit to the temp agency office. That same night, I disclosed my identity as a researcher to Sato and Murata as well. Sato and Murata both successfully secured a job that afternoon. Together with Sato and Murata, I had decided to use the short remaining time to interview workers I was interested in finding out more about. I asked Adachi if he was interested in going out with me to the nearby train station where there are small coffee shops and family restaurants. He was there alright. We had a short laugh after letting him know that we were dismissed too. After taking a hot, long shower, I asked Adachi if he was interested in going out with me to the nearby train station. I was interested in finding out more about the workers I had met here. I now had to rush the process until I depart to who-knows-where for the next workplace depending on tomorrow’s visit to the temp agency office. That same night, I disclosed my identity to Sato and Murata as well. Sato and Murata both successfully secured a job that afternoon. Together with Sato and Murata, we had a short conversation in my dormitory room that night.

Adachi, Chiba, and I headed out to the temp agency office located several train stations away from the dormitory. Once we arrived at the office, we were each served by an agent as usual. The case was not a matter of speed. I was fast enough not to be warned. It was not failing to memorize the Vital Points or shout out the salutations. I had it all right. Rather, it was because I was not following orders. But I could only guess. Neither the temp agent nor the trainer was open enough to inform me.

As we got off the van, the agent told us to just relax for today and show up to the appointment set up for tomorrow morning at the nearby agency office. We then walked over to Adachi’s dorm room, who was ordered to be on “stand-by” at his dorm apartment set for us tomorrow morning at the nearby agency branch office. We then

It was because I was not following orders. But I could only guess. Neither the temp agent informed me. If was not a matter of speed. I was fast enough not to be warned.
that was created at my first visit at Shinjuku. There were no more papers to be filled out. He asked if I had any specific preferences in terms of geographical location of work, type of job, and wage. I told him I have no preference. The list of jobs he then pulled out were the same as the ones shown at my visit to the Shinjuku office, such as manufacturing copy machines in Kanagawa prefecture, bearing manufacturer in Kanagawa, and flat screen panel manufacturer in Chiba prefecture. Without a clear reason, I chose the copy machine factory in Kanagawa. The agent called the manufacturer on the spot. The contact person at the factory could not be reached, so the agent told me that he would call me later with the result. It took less than an hour for me to leave the temp agency office. Next was Adachi’s turn. I left the office and waited for him at a nearby coffee shop.

Adachi later told me that he was not introduced to any of the jobs that were introduced to me. The agent told him that they are going to continue looking for jobs that they think is fit for him thus to wait for them to call him. I assumed he was never going to be introduced to a job and the agency was waiting for him to leave and find work on his own. However, the agency called him that afternoon and said they have a job waiting for him at a rubber processing factory. He was to assemble at a train station 30 minutes away tomorrow at 1 pm. He did not have a clue what the job required him to do. Chiba was introduced to the same jobs I was introduced to. He was to report to the workplace on the 18th after the summer holiday. In my case, I received a phone call from the temp agency around 3 pm. I was told that the copy machine manufacturer did not accept me but there is another job available at an auto parts manufacturer in inner-city Kanagawa prefecture. The agent asked me to report to the temp agency office near the auto parts manufacturer
on the 18th. I agreed. That late afternoon was the last time I saw Adachi and Chiba. We all departed and went our own ways.

The second factory I was dispatched to was one of the many group companies with a parent company that together constituted an electronics conglomerate that built many things electrically powered, from urban electricity and transportation infrastructures, computer servers, to household electronic goods. The factory I was dispatched to was owned by a group company that manufactured auto parts for its corporate clients. The group ran about a half dozen factories with numerous subsidiary companies under its umbrella. The factory at which I spent approximately five weeks was a medium sized factory that manufactured engine parts.

I visited the temp agency office located one minute away from the train station closest to the factory. The north side of the station was busy with large supermarkets, department stores, and bank offices that were connected by elevated pathways. The south side of the train station was where the temp agency office was located. This side was quieter with a few pubs and bars, small-business offices, and residential apartments further away from the station. A copy of the new Assignment Guide had been brought over to my dorm on the evening of the 6th before I left the first workplace. It had a simple map of the location of the local branch office and the time of report designated at 2 pm on the 18th. I had brought everything in my traveler’s backpack, including my lap top, voice recorder, interview consent form, pocket sized notebooks, and some clothes and other necessary paraphernalia.

At the temp agency office, I was welcomed first by a pink collar worker and taken into a cubicle. I then was met by a male agent who happened to be the same age as I was.
He spoke in a big brotherly tone. He went through the Description of the Work Place sheet and briefed me about the place of work, what the factory was manufacturing, possible positions I may be assigned to work, current shifts, holidays, and the pay. He said there are about seventy to eighty workers that are currently dispatched to the company. The agent then moved on to explaining about the dormitory, its location, the monthly rent, and the rented furniture available in the room such as television and refrigerator. During the briefing, he made the job look appealing by telling me that this job pays more than the monthly wage printed on the Description (because the workplace is currently busy with overtime work). He also said, “We need to have you work for at least one year. Anything less is going to be a loss for both of us… I have seen many factories, and the work here is on the easier side.” However, he never hinted at the insecure nature of the job. In retrospect, every single temp worker from this factory was released in December of that year when the financial crisis hit the Japanese manufacturing industry.

The agent then took me to the dormitory in a car. The dormitory was an old walk-up apartment that stood right by a road with heavy traffic. It was walking distance both from the train station and the factory. The first floor was separated into four mom-and-pop karaoke bars and yakitori restaurant. My room was a second floor corner room. The concrete hallway faced the road without any shades. Naked electricity meters bulged out. The agent opened the door, and muggy air came out from the heavy metal door. It was a simple, single room with a bathroom/shower and small kitchen space. The agent opened the glass door at the end of the room. The floor made a cheap hollow sound as we entered the room.
After I laid down my backpack, we headed to the factory. It took less than five minutes by car from the dorm. He showed his pass as he drove inside the factory. He then showed me around the factory premise which was a much smaller scale than the auto maker giant I was dismissed from a week earlier. We began with the cafeteria. The lights were off, and the middle aged part-time female workers were sitting together in the corner. They must have finished work and were taking a break after the busy lunch time. The agent told me to purchase a prepaid card to use the food service here. We stepped outside to the smoking area. He said to remember this place because this is where he usually meets the workers he manage. We then entered the shop floor. It was quiet inside, with no one working. The agent said right now is a ten-minute break. The scale of the factory here was smaller overall: the ceiling was lower, the aisles were narrower, and the number of workers observed was less.

After a brief tour of the factory, we returned to his car. Inside the car, he made the final confirmation with me if I am willing to be employed for this job. I answered yes. He was happy to hear my response, and asked me when I wish to start working. I said tomorrow. He said he would have to confirm with the factory representative since it is already fairly late in the afternoon, and said he would give me a call. He then took me back to my dorm on his car. Before we departed, he gave me a list of things to bring on my first day of work. Later that afternoon, it was confirmed that my first day of work was going to start tomorrow, and that the agent is going to pick me up at 7:40 am at the dorm because I do not have a pass yet to enter the factory premises. As was the case at the auto maker, the agent had to accompany me to the first day of work at the factory. After I hung up the phone, as I sat down alone in the empty dormitory, I told myself that
tomorrow, I am not going to make the same mistake I made at the auto maker. I promised to myself that I am going to stay on the job by following all orders, abiding by the standard operation manuals, and persevering in all demands as all fresh temp workers do at the point of entry to survive the first cut.

Summary

This chapter examined what happens to temp workers when they first arrive at the user client’s factory. Temp workers undergo a process of marking and weeding out the unfit and inept. In other words, while screening performed by the temp agencies was minimal, temp workers underwent a second round of screening by the user clients. Some large companies, like the one I was dispatched to for the first job, held an official training period where trainers were specifically designated to test the temp workers’ aptitude by having them listen to lectures and participate in hands-on physical drills. Smaller factories, like the second factory I was dispatched to, did not have a training session. I sat through a couple of hours of safety lectures, and was immediately placed on the assembly line. User clients put the temp workers through a sieve to ensure some kind of quality from the freshly dispatched workers who were a hodge-podge of workers arbitrarily selected by the temp agencies. The system of temporary agency work also allowed the user clients to ask for a quick replacement. It was this logic of survival of the fittest that made the freshly dispatched temp workers sit through the lecture obediently and work at their full potential during the physical drills even when the treatment they received seemed unreasonable at times. After all, temp workers were there to earn a living, and the punishment for not following the orders and giving their best was dismissal. The logic of
survival of the fittest that dominated the shop floor powerfully shaped the behaviors of the temp workers newly arriving at the factories.
CHAPTER 5

INDIVIDUAL FORMS OF WORKER AGENCY: HARD WORK

One of the most striking patterns that emerged from observing temp workers work at Japanese factories is that many of them worked very hard. These workers were undoubtedly placed in a context in which they were structurally coerced to exert effort. As noted in an earlier chapter, the job physically demanded that one work hard to fulfill the task. Workers also worked long hours, and worked additional hours when requested to do overtime or to come out for work on a holiday. To remain on the job, workers had to persevere and endure, which is part of the definition of working hard. However, these workers also worked hard in the sense of giving effort beyond what was required of them to keep the job. Temp workers not only diligently engaged in their tasks but also gave extra effort far above merely fulfilling their given tasks.

For example, Kondo was a worker in the assemblage section adjacent to mine. He was a young man in his mid-twenties from a town in northern Japan, who had hopped through two factories as a temp worker before arriving at this factory. He stood at the very end of the assembly line, where his task was to inspect the assembled product for any defects or scratches. The standard operation manual clearly demarcates the assembly procedure for each position, separating each person’s task from the others. It was a general rule to follow the designated procedure, which meant one had to work within one’s own assigned task as designated by the manual. However, Kondo regularly stripped the task away from the worker before him, who was somewhat on the slow side, and worked on it himself. Kondo had been scolded several times by the line leader to mind
his own task and not bother beyond it. It was the line leaders and other permanent workers’ job to assist others when necessary. But Kondo kept on crossing the line, working beyond what was demanded of him. One day, he was finally taken to the corner of the assembly room by the line leader and was scolded harshly. Uemura, the temp worker with whom I talked to the most during my stint at the factory, recalled this event and said, “There’s no point in working that hard…!” What was interesting was that Uemura was also a very hard-working temp.

Uemura was a high school graduate in his mid-thirties with a hairdo of the time, dyed in brown. He had been on the job for three months when I arrived at the factory. He stood to my right, one position downstream on the assembly line. He was never absent from work and always voluntarily worked over time, and also was the number one man to come out for holiday shift. He said that putting in those extra hours was in order to maximize his monthly wage. And I believed him; working longer hours is one of the very few means left for temp workers to compensate for their low hourly wage and lack of seasonal bonus benefits. Such exertion of effort is part of temp work, and can be explained in terms of rational pursuit of material interests. However, similar to the case of Kondo, Uemura displayed evidence of hard work that cannot necessarily be explained in terms of economic rationality.

One day, the line finished the quota for manufacturing V6 engine shafts. Our next assignment was to start working on the V8 engine shafts. This transition required exchanging the V6 shaft mounts with the V8 mounts which were not only heavy but also very expensive, therefore requiring care, knowledge, and responsibility in handling them right. Changing these mounts required stopping the line, lifting the oil-drenched mounts
off of the line, loading them carefully on a cart, and then loading the V8 mounts onto the line. For me, this was a moment to stretch my forearm, which had been locked into gripping the air wrench, and to bend my stiffened knees. I also stepped aside from the line so as not to get in the way. I took my gloves off and watched; after all, a job like this that had to do with setting up or making adjustments to the line was the permanent employees’ job. That had been made clear during the safety lecture. Symbolic of such division of labor was the bright-colored screwdriver permanent workers wore on their belt. I never saw anyone actually whip it out and use it, but it showed that it was their job to do the set-up and various problem-solving. However, it was different for Uemura. When the line stopped, without being asked to do so by the permanent workers, he swiftly maneuvered behind the backs of people crammed on the line to help the permanent workers who were preparing to set up. He carefully rolled out the heavy cart loaded with the V8 mounts and lent a hand to the regular workers, while the rest of the temporary help workers stood there and watched. I commented to him during break on how he worked so hard. He responded, “It’s for the money… Money is everything, my friend.” But this time, such an economic rationale did not explain the services he offered beyond what was required of his position, as they did not lead to more money.

On a later day, Uemura had been looking quite sick with symptoms of flu. During breaks on the preceding days, he had been telling me he felt feverish and had joint pains. I jokingly told him to get away, and then told him to take it easy. He had been consistently reporting to work. Even if he took a day off, nobody was going to nag about his absence. Finally, when we were on a night shift, he did not report to work. I thought it only natural, but after about an hour or so, he came rushing in. The team leader came
over, surprised, to figure out why Uemura had come in when he apparently did not look to be at his best. Uemura told the people around him that he had slept in after taking medication. Toda, the line leader, walked away with a tap on his shoulder, saying “Thanks for coming, buddy. You’re the man.”

During the break, we chatted in the smokers’ box. The senior permanent worker Mukai, Uemura, and I, plus a few others, were sitting together as usual during the ten minute break. Mukai was the most senior on our team, who was just about to reach retirement with a hefty allowance. He was there as a helper sent from another factory, and I enjoyed being with him for the candid statements he made and his somewhat aloof attitude at work, mouthing around and taking things easy. Since he was positioned right behind me on the assembly line, he used to whisper in my ear, “Work with some room in yourself” and gently elbow me when I was frantically trying to keep up with the pace. He provided a cushion in the often edgy and irritated shop floor atmosphere. Even the line leader could not reprimand him for joking around due to his senior status.

Mukai asked Uemura why he had showed up that night. Uemura responded with his usual answer, that he needed to make money. He then added, “And if Mr. Takahashi (a permanent employee help worker who had been sent in to our team) learns my job while I am not here, then it’s going to be like, ‘We no longer need you.’”

Everyone present listening to him, including Uemura himself, presumably, knew that he was not going to be dismissed just for Takahashi learning the task while Uemura was out for a single night. Mukai grinned with an “ah-hah!” look on his face, and then began to laugh. He said, “I see… So you’re working hard to win their (the permanent employees, esp. the foreman’s) favor?! Nothing’s more comical than that! Your pay isn’t
going to increase a bit. Even when we meet the quota, Toda (the foreman)’s walking away with all the credit! You gain nothing for getting cozy with the permanent workers.”

Had Mukai guessed correctly that Uemura was working for recognition in addition to the money? Winning trust or recognition and economic security could be related, if the workplace offered an upwardly mobile ladder for temp workers to be directly hired by the user client as permanent workers. However, the factory we worked for offered a permanent position to temp workers only if that temp worker had worked for the company for five years by the time he reached the age of 35. No single temp worker I met came even close to working there for five years. Uemura was aware that he did not meet either of the requirements. Moreover, he had explicitly stated to me that he did not wish to become a permanent employee at the factory. He also occasionally made comments to me during breaks, such as “There’s no way one can sustain this kind of crappy work. My mind is going to rot away.” He despised this place. Once, when we were walking out of the cafeteria after quickly finishing our dinner before the overtime shift, he looked at the workers still eating, who appeared to be temp workers, and said to me, “This is life’s graveyard...” He distanced himself from the factory and the work environment. Thus, his practices as a hard worker, spending surprising energy and commitment to the job, could not be explained by a wish to win recognition in hopes of becoming a permanent worker.

Uemura was not the only one who worked hard. Higa was a temp worker who had entered the factory on the same day as me, but from a different temp agency. I got to know him because we had gone through the safety lectures together before we were placed on different teams; after that, we were only able to meet during lunch break or
after the shift was over. While we rested outside the cafeteria on a bench during lunch break, I asked him how work was going for him. He told me that there was a permanent worker on his line that was not following the standard procedure. He told me the worker kept on pushing the pace without regards to quality. That frustrated Higa, but when he complained to that permanent worker and warned him to follow the standard procedures, they got into a small quarrel afterwards, creating ill feelings on both sides. I was surprised to hear this—Higa was indeed an experienced factory worker, having hopped from one factory to another for the past ten years as a temp, and was well aware of what was considered quality work in the factories, but while I personally felt like I could care less if the permanent workers were not following the manual, Higa, who could get in trouble for talking back to permanent workers, still went out of his way to caution them and tell them to do the job right.

I too found myself breaking my back, exerting effort and demonstrating commitment to doing a good job. The first week was all about sweating to learn what later became a simple routine. Even though the task essentially consisted of unsophisticated repeated motions, there were skills to be learnt in order to function well, and there was room to become better. And once having embodied the skills to carry out the job smoothly, practicing my skills on the job and realizing the improvement I had made led me to experience joy. There were times when I felt anger rise inside me, my face flushing with such extreme frustration that I felt like throwing the air wrench at the mounts that never stopped rolling in front of me, waiting to be engaged. However, I also came to be unconsciously immersed in the job, doing the job as fast as I could without giving it a second thought. I experienced positive emotions when walking out of the
assembly room after long hours on a night shift, knowing that I had done a good job. I was happy that I had done a good job that night, pushing the pace without mistakes. I increased my speed to reach the day’s quota, and found myself happy when I could deploy the skills necessary to speed up.

Furthermore, once, on a day shift, I got frustrated when a senior temp worker positioned upstream was intentionally slowing down the line’s pace. He said that the testing machine was not working well that day and that he needed to slow down in feeding the mounts into the machine. It was surprising to realize that I was actually concerned about the quota we needed to produce for that day. But on top of that, I even walked up to him to let him know that the testing machine was working just fine, and asked him to feed in the mounts. The frustration I felt was almost like a reflex, an emotional reaction aroused by someone disturbing my work flow. I was absorbed in the task, i.e. “in the zone,” and hated the fact that someone had broken my concentration and interfered with my performance. In retrospect, I was the one who broke the solitary act of goldbricking, or slowdown, by a fellow temp. The fratricide that I committed against a fellow temp was not in response to a rational calculation in pursuit of higher wage, job security, or recognition. It came out naturally, and I felt surprised at myself and sorry for the worker when I went back to work and realized what I’d just done.

In the previous chapter, I examined the process of entry and the conditions in which temp workers find themselves, and the structure and culture of factory work that the temp workers must respond to and manage well in order to survive. Factory work is physical work that involves bodily pain. Workers must embody the sense and feel for the work that the Japanese workers call *kan-kotsu*. Temp workers are immediately removed
from the shop floor if judged by the user client to be incompetent. They also suffer from the cultural stigma attached to temp workers. In this chapter, I examine how temp workers live out and respond to this structure and culture of temp work, and aim to shed light on the agency of workers living on precarious work, i.e., the concrete ways in which temp workers manage these structures and strive to make work tolerable and thus enable themselves to survive on the job.

I demonstrate in this chapter that the predominant form of worker agency is diligence and commitment. Temp workers manage bodily, physical pain with perseverance. Workers grit their teeth and work through the initial suffering in order to attain the necessarily bodily capital. These novice workers also exert effort to learn the knobs involved in factory work. Workers use their imagination to find the optimal way to assemble that works best for them, which leads to mastering the kan-kotsu, or what Bourdieu called the practical sense. As the necessary skills become a part of them, embodied in them, workers come to experience joy in factory work. Workers see themselves reflected in the good job they did. Becoming better at work seductively leads them to seek further improvement; growing into competent workers through their own effort-making leads them to secure comfortable places on the shop floor.

In other words, temp workers work very hard, involving their psyche in finding ways to work faster and mindfully aiming for high quality output. Here I revisit the Marxist question of surplus appropriation by raising the question of why do temp workers work as hard as they do when management rewards nonstandard workers so little for their hard work. Studies on blue collar permanent workers in Japanese factories have argued that the workers’ commitment is founded upon the institutional arrangements of
job security, seniority wage, and enterprise unionism, all of which exclude temp workers. I demonstrate that hard work is a result of workers actively negotiating the daily psychological and physical demands of factory temp work. Workers new to factory work initially find it physically and psychologically demanding, and those that persist discover that engagement – not detachment – is what makes work tolerable. Workers initially exert themselves to acquire the feel and touch necessary to survive the difficulties and insecurities they face on the job. Once ingrained, this practical, embodied knowledge and skill transforms coerced, alienated labor into something deeply satisfying, and produces in the temp workers the genuine passion in factory work. The joy they experience is a seductive force that makes structurally alienating work tolerable. However, temp workers do not commit themselves to the job blindly. They in fact reflect on the commitment they display on the shop floor, which stands in stark contrast to the discriminatory treatment they receive. The lives of temp workers are characterized by the ambivalent emotions of joy and suffering.

**Acquiring the Practical Sense**

The practical sense is what sports players refer to as “the feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990a: 61). It is the scheme that sensitizes the players to the demands and logic of the game. It is also the practical, bodily mastery of the technicalities of moving and responding intuitively and instantaneously to the demands of the game without contemplation. The practical sense enables and constrains action, as in “He quite naturally materializes at just the place the ball is about to fall, as if the ball were in command of him – but by that very fact, he is in command of the ball” (ibid: 63). As the
player grows into a competent player by acquiring the practical sense, he becomes the “game incarnate, do[ing] at every moment what the game requires (ibid).” Mastering the practical knowledge is a prerequisite for one to engage the game competitively and win the rewards the game has to offer. As noted in an earlier chapter, part of the novice temp workers’ suffering arose from not having the feel and touch involved in factory work. Acquiring the practical sense entails having the physical, bodily capacity to perform the tasks, which many of the entry-level temps lacked as well. Therefore, when their jobs were on the line, temp workers made conscious effort to acquire the practical sense, which involved attaining the bodily capital and mastering the kan-kotsu (sense and touch).

Building the Body for Factory Work

Most novice temp workers faced physical issues, and the way workers managed the initial bodily suffering was by perseverance. Workers without the choice of quitting grit their teeth and worked through the pain until the body became accustomed to it. They persevered by letting the body take the beating on the job in order to acclimatize themselves to the physical demands of factory labor. It was by immersing themselves into the labor that novice temp workers developed their bodily capital.

My body was not used to standing on my feet for eight to ten hours a day while moving only my hands. By the second day on the line, I experienced knee and heel pain. I had to work by standing on my toes to ease the pain, which made my neighbors on the line laugh. I told this story to Higa when I bumped into him during lunch break. Despite my suffering body, Higa, who was more than ten years older than me, seemed to be doing
just fine, walking firm without seeming to experience any pain. After hearing my story, he said with a short laugh, “Your body’s not used to it just yet. You will be just fine.”

I found his comment to speak the truth. Many of the workers, both permanent and temp, did not necessarily have the physical appearance of being “fit.” Some were quite skinny. Others had visibly gained extra weight upon reaching middle age. The majority of them smoked. However, they were all physically enduring the strains of factory work. The key was perseverance, to simply to get acclimatized to the factory-specific physical strains by exposing the body to them. I went out to purchase insoles for my work shoes and cold packs to ease my knee and lower back pain. Wearing thick gloves and operating an impact wrench throughout the day also caused inflammation on the joints of my right hand, incurring what is called “trigger finger,” a kind of an occupational disorder in which the affected finger remains flexed when relaxing a fist. It takes painful effort to force the finger to extend to its natural position. However, perseverance was the solution. Working through the pain to overcome it was the prognosis I came up with, which worked well—the various pains in my body subsided after a week. It was a moment of joy when I realized that I could stand firm on both feet throughout the day and see my fingers work just fine as days went by.

While numerous others in the interviews recollected the initial bodily pain they experienced and used the word “nare” or “becoming habituated” to tell me how their body became naturally acclimated through perseverance, others shared with me the more active ways in which they had consciously made adjustments to physically survive the job. Nakamura told me he began running and working his muscles outside of work in order to build a body that could endure factory work. He worked on the main assembly
line at a truck manufacturer, where his position required that he shoot back and forth between the moving chassis and the parts box in which various parts to be assembled were stored. Being new to the job, he had to compensate for the extra time he took to assemble by running between the chassis and the parts box. Being a novice ultimately became an issue of time, which demanded extra physical output from him, but he was too new to know how to work with energy efficiency.

Nakamura: I couldn’t keep on running through the day. My stamina didn’t last. I gave out by mid-day, like “I’m already done for today.”… When you are not making it on time, finishing your job within your designated work area, you end up making up for the delay by running to go grab the parts… This used up so much of my energy…I couldn’t keep it up throughout the entire day.

Kojima: So…what did you do?
Nakamura: Well…first I memorized the code numbers for the parts, and then, I began to run and train my muscles.

His factory only ran on a day shift. Thus, during the evening when he got off work, he grabbed his sneakers and began to run around his dormitory. He also did sit-ups, push-ups, and squats. Factory work for him was a physical game, just like athletes training their muscles when they find their body requires more stamina. I was surprised and impressed to hear that, despite being a temp worker, he had exerted such extra effort even after he was exhausted from a full day of work.

Nakamura: It wasn’t that special…everyone on the shop floor did it. Everyone had to protect their own body. It’s so bad to injure your lower back… At my work place, everyone who worked trained their muscles… Unless you did so, you couldn’t last long in a workplace like that.

Nakamura imposed extra physical workouts on himself in order to build a body that could endure factory line work, while others gained bodily capital through perseverance. This mode of working hard was required of the job regardless of whether the worker was a
temp or permanent worker. Once on the shop floor, factory work took its toll on everyone’s physical health, and the way temp workers managed the bodily demand was through perseverance.

_Learning the Kan-Kotsu_

Another effort made by the temp workers to acquire the practical sense was to learn the _kan-kotsu_. As noted earlier, novice temp workers experienced difficulty in performing up to the expectations of the user client because they lacked the touch required in factory line work. In contrast to “skilled workers” who work in the knowledge or information economy, various kinds of physical work lumped together into the categories of “manual labor” or “blue-collar work” are considered to require less thinking and competence (Crawford 2009; Rose 2004). However, workers who do these jobs have claimed that “there’s really no such thing as unskilled work” (Rose 2004:129). Every job demands specific skills, which are acquired only by experience. In the case of the Japanese factory temp workers I met, many of them were not experienced in factory work. They came from all walks of life, from a former farmer to a construction site manager. Without having the _practical sense_ necessary for factory work, they found the job to be difficult, but failure to meet the minimum standard would lead to being handed down an “NG,” or dismissal. Under such pressure, the temp workers made conscious effort to find the best assembly method that worked for them, going through trial and error to embody the skills as quickly as possible.
Enomoto, formerly a housewife in her early fifties with a graduate degree in engineering, described the pace of work at the cosmetics factory where she temped for eight years as “beyond normal.” She stated in an interview,

For example, from picking up the lipstick from the line, then visually checking the critical points for any defects by twisting it once, out and back in, and then picking up the box and placing it in, folding the lid, and closing the box…that’s seven seconds.

Every motion was calculated, and a minor fumble resulted in delay of production and a harsh scolding. Contemplation did not make her fumble less. She had to “just get it by doing it over and over again.” Similar patterns of inexperienced novice workers working hard to learn the job-specific skills can be seen in other forms of physical work as well.

Working at a restaurant as a waitress requires that the worker memorize an array of orders for every table while new customers continue to come in. They must respond to multiple demands simultaneously, such as pouring more coffee over here while responding to a request to modify an order or bringing a replacement for a dropped fork over there. They must also display an amiable attitude in addition to learning how to carry multiple plates on both arms so that the plates never touch the food (Rose 2004:13). The waitress learns the skill “with continued practice” (ibid:9). In a workplace such as a General Motors factory, wet-sanding had to be done by applying pressure to the sand paper “not too much or too little” (ibid:128); the subtle yet sure skills for good performance, phrased as “developing a feel and an eye for the work” (ibid, emphasis added), were only acquired from experience. In other words, it was through practice that the motions were cognitively and physically ingrained into the body, so that labor output became automatic and done with the senses.
Kudo, a technical school graduate in his late twenties who temped for a truck manufacturer, expected line work to be manageable due to his experience as a licensed motorcycle mechanic. However, he found line work to be a completely different world, partly due to the physical stress from the double shifts but mostly due to the demands of the job itself. The line he worked on assembled multiple types of trucks. A domestic four ton came after a ten ton export to China. There were freezers, cleaners, and trailers. Including small differences in the specifications, Kudo had to deal with over forty types of trucks, each demanding particular tasks. An operation instruction sheet was attached to each chassis, specifying what parts to assemble. However, the sheet was a foreign language to the novice worker, since all the parts were listed by the code number. Kudo had to quickly read the matrix, identify the code number for the parts, and instantly make the connection between the code numbers and the designated parts in his head, all while being pressed by the moving line.

As a rookie, he consequently made mistakes, and was scolded by the team leader and by his trainer, who happened to be a seasoned temporary worker dispatched from a different temp agency. The trainer was a man who easily lost his temper. “Not that he was physically aggressive, but…verbally aggressive. He would yell at me, like, ‘What the hell are you doing?!’ ‘There’s nothing complex here, so get it right, damn it!’” Kudo suffered from being labeled the “incompetent temp.” As he later found out from the team leader several years later, Kudo came very close to being dismissed for not meeting the standards.

However, it was that same veteran temp worker who taught him the knacks that helped Kudo pull himself out of a spot.
Kudo: [The senior temp] told me, “Listen, the kotsu to the spot you’re working on is to look ahead. Always look ahead, and preempt.”

Having the “feel for the game” is about the capacity to “adjust not to what he sees but to what he fore-sees…anticipating the anticipations of the others” (Bourdieu 1990b:69).

What the senior temp worker taught Kudo as the necessary disposition for line work was exactly the practical sense the senior temp worker had himself acquired through experience. Kudo then began reporting to work early to check the list of cars that would be manufactured for the day. He anticipated the day by identifying the cars that required special work in advance, preparing the required job beforehand “so the line won’t be moving ahead of me.” Kudo oriented his mind towards being conscious of the one or two tasks waiting ahead.

The veteran temp worker also taught Kudo to learn the tasks with his body. The trick of the trade was to embody the routine.

Kudo: …He also told me, “Don’t take notes. Memorize with your body.” “Assemble by yourself, and memorize the job by doing it yourself. And then, repeat it. Or else you just won’t get it.”…

Kojima: I see. So he said to learn with your body…in other words, don’t think with your head.

Kudo: Right, “Don’t think with your head.” “Get the routine so that when you see it, you know it.” Your body immediately moves upon sight of the next truck.

The trainer led Kudo to acquire the bodily aspect of the practical sense, the practical mastery of the art of factory work, which is attained by ingraining the routine in the body so that seeing, knowing, and responding are synchronized and done “in the twinkling of an eye” (Bourdieu 1990b: 82). The good player finds oneself already doing the bodily maneuver the game demands without contemplation. This is the practical sense the
senior temp taught Kudo, i.e., to instill the routine in his body so that there was no lag between seeing, knowing, and working. Flyvbjerg (2001), in discussing the mechanism behind human learning, outlines different levels in the human-learning process, starting from the initial stage of the “novice” to reaching the final stage of the “expert” (2001:10). The expert, or “proficient performer,” recognizes situations intuitively and demands actions synchronically (ibid:17). Flyvbjerg states that genuine human expertise is characterized not so much by rational analytical thinking or deliberation, but rather by instantaneous thinking, or intuition; “[Experts] just do what ‘works’” (ibid).

The senior temp, instead of teaching Kudo tricks for restricting output, taught him how to survive the job by becoming a competent worker. Such pressure for full participation preached in practical detail by the senior temp worker was not experienced by Kudo as a coercive pressure to submit. Rather, Kudo found the lessons inspiring. It was positive guidance that helped relieve him from the daily suffering of his job.

Another temp worker I interviewed was Hamaguchi, a technical college graduate in his early forties who temped at a truck manufacturer. He was placed on the main assembly line, where he also dealt with different models coming down the line and was required to perform specific tasks for each type. At the end of a day’s work, he found himself asleep on the locker room bench with his neck bent forward. “I was completely worn out by the end of the day,” he said. But it was not only the physical weariness that made the job difficult; the task required using the sense he had not yet acquired.

There was one task that he could not master. He had to reach deep into the chassis and slip on a ring where he could not visually see it. “You can’t see where you’re reaching into. So you had to do it by searching with your hand. You had to do it by feel.”
There were times when the ring fit perfectly on the first attempt. At other times, he spent close to a minute just on that ring, and he ended up bumping into the next person’s work area. He either had to stop the line or get a permanent employee to lend him a hand before it was too late. “He (the permanent employee) knew I was trouble,” Hamaguchi stated. Finally one day, frustrated by Hamaguchi’s performance, the permanent employee brought over a trainer to stand right beside him as he was sweating over his task. The employee pointed his finger at Hamaguchi and yelled at the trainer, “Look at him! What the hell is this?! Train him better!”

Hamaguchi described the incident of public humiliation as “aggravating.” He also feared the possibility of being sentenced the “NG.” He faced a predicament: He was suffering from the very job he had chosen for survival. He was being marginalized on the shop floor for being an incompetent temp; waking up every morning to take his position on the line only to find himself enslaved by it was a heavy emotional burden. He knew he was going to cause trouble and that a harsh scolding was waiting for him. It was during this time of initial suffering that a young permanent employee sympathetic to Hamaguchi’s suffering gave him practical advice.

Hamaguchi: He was in his fourth or fifth year on the job. His spot on the line was close to mine. He told me something like, “Line work is about consciously thinking and trying to figure out the best way to be speedy, how to be more precise.”

Kojima: To consciously seek the best way, which is about training yourself to become better…

Hamaguchi: Yeah. He told me that if you work at all times conscious of improving yourself on the job, by figuring out ways to be speedy, how to be accurate…for example by rearranging the tool set-up, things like that…if you engage work habitually like that, you will improve. Work then becomes enjoyable.

K: That’s interesting.

Hamaguchi: A young guy tells me that.
K: The key word here is self-improvement.
Hamaguchi: Yeah.
K: “You can make yourself better.”
Hamaguchi: Right. It was not about doing it because you were told to…a young guy in his mid-twenties tells this to an old man in his mid-thirties (laughter). But I instantly understood what he meant. I mean, from my own work experiences.

Hamaguchi recalled this moment as a turn of the tide. After that, he reoriented his mind, which had been conquered by the daily pain and the anxiety of dismissal, to mindedly engage in the task and be conscious about how to improve at it. He began to involve his psyche in thinking about ways to make the job better for himself and attain personal growth through improvement. The work ethic preached by a permanent employee was accepted by Hamaguchi, who was working for lesser pay under an insecure employment arrangement, as positive, inspiring guidance, a way to pull himself out of the hole.

**Body Automatism**

As a result of making conscious effort to attain the bodily capital and touch required for factory labor, the temp workers succeeded in acquiring the *practical sense*, embodying the feel for the game of factory work. The workers reached a level of proficiency where labor was engaged without contemplation, a state of *body automatism* (Bourdieu 1990b:69). Labor no longer needed to be performed by conscious effort-making or by deliberation; it became pre-reflexive, automatic. Flyvbjerg (2001) also recognizes the capacity to engage in “effortless performance” as a consequence of reaching “the level of virtuosity” (17). Just like professional ball players who are able to dribble without reminding themselves of the correct steps, these temp workers became so proficient that they no longer had to be conscious of “preempting” but found the learned mind and body...
automatically anticipating the motion of the line with keen foresight. “Their skills have become so much a part of themselves that they are no more aware of them than they are of their own bodies” (ibid:19). They were able to give what the job demanded without effort.

Nakamura, a college graduate in his mid thirties who described his initial days in the factory as “a month of hell,” remembered when he had reached that level of proficiency as a result of making deliberate efforts to acquire the practical sense.

Nakamura: That moment, that feeling you know, your body’s moving without thinking…You don’t even remember the job you’ve done. Your memory’s gone. (laughter)
Kojima: (laughter).
Nakamura: Yeah, but you find the bolts are all neatly screwed in…It’s automatic….
Kojima: Wow.
Nakamura: …Also, you come to be able to tell you have the wrong part just by grabbing it. I don’t need to gaze at the code number to confirm anymore. You know it the moment you grab it. It is these areas of senses, you know.

This shows that Nakamura had come to be able to perform his job intuitively without conscious thinking or deliberation, attaining a “virtuoso expertise” or state of “body automatism.” The waitress from the earlier example also mentioned that after continued practice, she was able to attain the level of expertise where she was able to perform her job magically without having to think about it (Rose 2004:9). Such a level of expertise was attained by the daily experience of using one’s body on the job. Once the skill was attained, skilled performance became a part of the body. Nakamura became one with the job, just like how “sitting at a computer, a virtuoso secretary ‘is one’ with the machine and does not think over what finger does what on the keyboard” (Flyvbjerg 2001:19).
Similarly, Tamura, a college graduate temp worker in his early thirties who worked as a machine operator, described the process of transforming into a proficient worker as becoming “naturalized” to the task. He remembered when his body was still not used to working in the humidity during the hot summer days and when he took aspirin to ease the headache from heat exhaustion. When it came to the task of cutting gear rings, until he learned the touch, he had to consciously give thought to determining the right angles. However, after several months of trial and error, he was able to “do the job humming,” a sign of mastering the practical knowledge. He took pride in being able to produce quality gear rings by running the machines “better than the permanent employees.”

Ashida, a female interviewee in her early thirties who had experience temping for close to three years at four factories, similarly recalled that she initially had no idea how to even use an air wrench. However, she reached the moment of attaining body automatism when she found herself moving her hand and doing the job automatically while falling half-asleep on a night shift. She had mastered the job so as to be able to perform without consciously reflecting on the routine. Reaching this level of expertise is akin to being able to ride a bicycle, a highly skilled performance that can be done without contemplation once the skill is embodied through repeated experience (Flyvbjerg 2001:19).

When temp workers entered the factory, they endeavored to acquire the practical sense for the purpose of survival. Workers deliberately worked hard to learn factory-specific knowledge, embodying the sense and touch while enduring bodily pain to attain the necessary physique. During the process of adapting to factory work, these workers
faced interpersonal labor control from agents, permanent employees of the user client, and veteran temps who had already acquired the practical sense. Agents were present to execute the replacement order from the client company, but also to console and encourage the suffering temp workers. Permanent employees, already living the culture of labor-management cooperation, induced the temp workers to commit mind and body to working faster and with quality, linking participation with attaining personal growth instead of teaching tricks to take it easy on the job. Seasoned temp workers served a similar role, directing the suffering temp workers’ attention from pain to commitment. Such external stimuli to dedicate the self to work hard were experienced not as coercive pressure to submit, but as positive guidance, merciful helping hands that lit the road to salvation. Temp workers made deliberate efforts to shape themselves into competent workers. As a result, proficiency manifested in the state of body automatism, the pre-reflexive response of the body and mind to give what the game demanded.

**Bearing the Illusio, or the Passion and Joy in Factory Work**

Acquiring the practical sense was accompanied by a “subjective sense – a meaning and a raison d’être” (Bourdieu 1990b:66), a growing commitment from within to doing quality work. Without it necessarily being the consequence of coercion or calculative pursuit of rewards, workers came to bear genuine interest in perfecting the art of factory work. Workers came to be taken in and by the work (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:116), immersing the self and injecting the mind into the assigned tasks, practicing spontaneous creativity in producing with perfection. I borrow from Bourdieu to call such preoccupation illusio, interchangeably referred to as commitment or interest, not in the
narrow sense of rational choice theory, but as in being mentally and emotionally invested in the game per se. An analogy of “playing for the sake of playing” can be drawn to understand the state of being “taken in and by the game,” compared to the economic rationale of “playing to score” or “playing for money and fame.”

Kudo began to be taken in and by the game, experiencing the seduction factory work had to offer. Once he mastered the practical knowledge, he came to invest his mind in the pursuit of speed and aesthetic quality of output. He came to value the job per se as he became proficient at it.

Kudo: The difference is in the tiny details…for example, the wires. You can simply do them without giving thought to the details, but you come to notice that when they’re sticking out, it makes the job difficult for the next person down. Then, you place the wires and arrange them, push them in so it makes the job run smooth for the next person. You clip the hose at a certain angle so it doesn’t interfere with the tasks down the line. I was conscious of these details.

Surprised by Kudo’s devotion to the work, I asked him why he had come to care so much about the “tiny details,” spending his mind on improving the quality of output.

Kudo: …You know…just making something is, you know, mediocre. Just doing it for the hell of it, that’s nothing special… To put it differently, it wasn’t that the output was the same regardless of who worked on it… It’s about quality. That becomes the joy of work… And that [joy] will then lead to pursuing the next goal, a higher goal.

Kudo had come to involve his consciousness and creative mind in outputting a quality product, and he experienced joy in doing so because the quality of output depended on who worked on it; he saw himself implicated in his own output. He saw his individuality reflected in what he had assembled, which served as a seductive force in leading him to involve himself more deeply in the job. Matthew Crawford (2009), a Ph.D. in political
philosophy, reflected on how and why he imposed a high aesthetic standard of “workmanlike installation” and felt “responsible to my better self” in attaining perfection on the job he worked as an electrician (p.14). Since his work got covered up inside walls, probably no one saw the perfect job he did. The satisfaction was rather “intrinsic and private” (p.14). In explaining the source of such hard work and the joys arising from it, he cites the words of the philosopher Alexandre Kojève, who is in line with Karl Marx’s social and philosophical anthropology behind the idea of species-being.

   The man who works recognizes his own product in the World that has actually been transformed by his work: he recognizes himself in it, he sees in it his own human reality, in it he discovers and reveals to others the objective reality of his humanity… (Crawford 2009:14-15)

It is in the mental and physical engagement with the external world, labor in the broad sense, that humans see their human potential. They literally feel and see themselves reflected in the job they do. Humans realize the difference they are able to make in the world through mindful physical labor. This is the mechanism behind the causal linkage between being absorbed in physical work and the joy arising from it. The process of becoming proficient in what one finds meaning in leads the worker to pursue ever higher proficiency and improvement on the job, being absorbed in the job, which leads to experiencing joy and satisfaction.

   In the following account, Hamaguchi expressed the relationship between becoming proficient at work, the joy arising from becoming proficient, and the bearing of interest in further pursuit of self-improvement.

Hamaguchi: Once I became able to perform the tasks I initially could not do well, I somehow came to like it.
Kojima: Hmm… You came to enjoy the fact that you could do it well?
Hamaguchi: That too, but also, you come to appreciate the difference in the quality of what you have come to yield. You realize it is so much better than what you used to make. You used to use up a lot of time and output this crooked mess. Someone down the line had to re-do it. But now, it’s so much better, much more beautiful. You think to yourself “now this can actually be sold on the market.” …and you can do it at a much faster speed too.

The phenomenon observed among temp workers nurturing the *illusio* of factory work runs parallel to the way students of boxing are further pulled into the sport after training hard to master the art and finally being able to “hit somebody with that perfect punch,” experiencing a “helluva feelin’” (Wacquant 1995b: 506). The exhilaration and seduction that makes boxers further invest themselves in the game is what the temp workers experience after persevering through physical pain and harsh scolding to finally being able to “do it” the way they have been consciously training themselves to. Another worker, Machida, a technical school graduate in his late forties, also had a hard time adapting to factory work, but recalled the joy he experienced when his struggle bore fruit.

Machida: The time is calculated down to the second, and when I finally made it within the time frame, I was like, “Yes!” I had been trying different tool arrangements, telling my captain about the way I set up my tools… And finally, when you’re able to make it in time, “Oh yeah.”

He explained that the engine line came with an instruction sheet that noted the truck’s export destination, varying from Southeast Asia to Zimbabwe. “I felt the joy in being a part of a car that was going out to the world, no matter how small my contribution may have been.”

Similarly, Nakamura confessed having warm feelings when he saw brand new trucks running on the factory premises with check marks in pink fluorescent color still freshly visible, marks which came from him. The satisfaction arising from seeing how the full exercise of one’s hard-won skills can make a difference in the world, and therefore
experiencing a real feeling of being alive, is confirmed by the statements of waitresses mentioned earlier. They mentioned that it was during the rush hour “when I turn on” that they felt joy in the work, as it was the deployment of their skills at the fullest potential which enabled the restaurant to survive its busiest hours. It was “that sense of being in the middle of things,” the intrinsic value that work holds for those who work hard, that these workers missed the most (Rose 2004:22-23).

Other workers such as Higa used the word *kodawari* to describe their interest and investment in the quality output they had come to nurture. *Kodawari* is a noun form of “to care or mind,” and it is the investment of mind and time, the genuine passion and preoccupation in the pursuit of the ideal aesthetic state. It is a concrete sign that workers are bearing the *illusio*, the interest and commitment in the game. “All trades are equally honorable,” Higa said, describing what factory temp work meant to a veteran temp worker like him. I asked him to elaborate.

Higa: What I am making now is going to go out into people’s hands. Somebody is going to pay to make use of these goods. I wish them to be happy with the purchase. I want to make a product that I myself would like to buy. That is how I think when I work. And I do not want to make something in a way that I myself would prefer not to buy...I want to manufacture with accuracy, with the least margin of error possible. I judge for myself, “This one, I made well.” That’s how I work.

I then asked him why he would invest himself in the work so much when management returns so little for his devotion. He replied,

Higa: I know what you mean. I used to think like you. I used to think, “Why should I care about quality when there’s no benefit for me?...What’s in it for me?...But, that changed. When you work in the factories long enough, your thoughts change. I believe it’s only natural. You come to bear a sense of pride in the act of making.
He continued,

Higa: The task a temp worker gets assigned to is, after all, boring. It’s monotonous, repeating the same motions over and over again...That’s the bottom line. In this monotony, if you work with an I-can-care-less wandering mindset, work becomes just unbearable. You just cannot last long on the job. Then, only an exit is waiting for you. Unless you impose on yourself a small goal, some kind of purpose in work, you cannot last on the job.

As noted earlier, Higa was a veteran temp worker in his late forties who had been temping for over ten years, and who saw no other job opportunity but to work as a temp in the factories. He also had the “penetration” (Willis 1977), or the awareness and insight of how the temp system works (“What’s in it for me?”). However, as he experienced more factories as a temp worker, he came to understand that the job was too alienating for him to survive on it by merely treating it as an instrumental means to earning an income. He had come to turn the monotonous task into an object of will and consciousness. He came to “judge for himself” the quality of output, a private endeavor to see himself in the job he did and cherish the difference he could make. The joy of physical work comes from being absorbed in the activity itself. The physical activity becomes “burdensome” (Crawford 2009:194) when one’s attention is instead placed on the instrumental values of the activity, such as extrinsic rewards and punishments. Higa understood the alienating consequence of disengagement from his long experience of factory temping. Work was experienced as a source of suffering when he distanced himself from the job he did, and he was able to appreciate the job more by injecting himself into it.

Other workers I interviewed identically used the word “self-satisfaction” to denote their serious investment of mind and body into work for little return. I had the
chance to interview two seasoned temp workers together, who worked at the same 
construction machinery plant. Taira was in his early forties with six years of factory work 
experience, and had been temping for a one and a half years as a forklift operator when I 
interviewed him. He confessed that he usually showed up to work early and got some 
work done before the morning assembly bell rang. He also said he “sometimes” 
continued to work well into the short forty-five minute lunch break, to which Ito, the 
other interviewee, quickly said, “Not sometimes, always!” Ito was also in his early forties, 
with close to fifteen years of temping experience in the factories. Both were well aware 
that they were paid far less than the permanent workers on the shop floor. In accounting 
for why he would work that hard when he was paid less than the permanent workers, 
Taira stated, “I cannot help but do it. Working this way makes me content.” I then asked 
Ito if he understood or sympathized with what Taira had just said. Ito answered, “Yes, I 
feel the same…it’s about self-satisfaction, to put it simply.”

These statements are evidence of the kind of transformation some temp workers 
go through, from being forced to play the game for survival, sometimes starting with a 
withdrawn attitude (“Why should I care?”), to autonomously immersing themselves into 
the task beyond the initial narrow economic interest of job security. As Sennett and Cobb 
(1972) state, “[A] person takes responsibility for his own alienation. He has to, because 
he…is a human being experiencing that alienation day after day” (p. 95). Alienation is 
too painful for the worker, and workers take it as their own task, their own personal 
problem to cope with, to make the job come closer to their existence by injecting the self 
into it and making it as intimate as possible.
Moments of Self-Reflection

Workers were seductively pulled in to doing quality work as a result of attaining the physical capacity to endure factory work, acquiring the practical sense required in performing well on the shop floor, and seeing themselves reflected in the good job they did. However, it was not that these workers were fully immersed in the game without the capacity to reflect on their devotion. They did in fact have their moments of self-reflection, questioning and doubting their commitment. After all, their status as temp workers and the treatment they received caused emotional suffering, especially when they were consciously aware of the commitment to the job they had come to bear. Temp workers looked at themselves from the outside in, making attempts to negotiate their committed performance on the one hand and the poor treatment they received on the other.

The treatment that the temp workers received functioned as a trigger to reflect on their devotion. Ashida stated in an interview, “I worked hard, and I wanted to work hard… But you know, I felt it was all in vain.” She persevered through the scolding she received for subpar performance, and although factory work was new to her, she learned the job by involving her mind in thinking about how she could improve. She attained the proficiency she aimed for through hard work, and the permanent employees recognized her commitment, praising her devotion with words such as “Good job! Keep going at it!” Such recognition of her output led her to involve herself more in the assigned tasks. However, at the same time, the way she was used on the shop floor as a temp worker blunted her enthusiasm. She felt she was “pushed around” the shop floor from one position to another, to “fill a hole over there because we no longer need you here.” The
rotation was not for the purpose of cross-training, but was about using her as a leftover to work on miscellaneous tasks. Such treatment caused her to question her commitment. “I was at a loss as to how to keep my motivation.” The monthly pay checks also triggered doubts. She felt “Sad…and empty” looking at her monthly check. “The meager pay basically told me that I am no good. My hard work was not recognized, you know. I wasn’t appreciated.” While she had moments of enthusiastically devoting herself to the job, it was this differential treatment that made her wake up to the realization that she was a temp after all. When the line was moving, she had no room to think about the unequal treatment, but during time off work, alone in her dormitory room, she was haunted by the thought of being a worthless worker.

The client company’s lack of will to cross-train the temp workers also triggered moments of self-reflection. Tamura recollected that he used to lie down on the bench with his arms crossed during the break on night shift. Observing the sky on muggy summer nights, he used to think to himself, “What is this treatment…am I a slave?” He was a proud machine operator, confident of his skill in cutting differential gear rings better than the permanent workers. He was an honorable member of the shop floor for the skills he had come to acquire and the devotion he displayed. However, there were moments when permanent employees would restrict him to temp status. The illusio he had come to bear led him to ask the permanent workers to teach him different positions. “I asked him, ‘Teach me more.’ And what [the permanent worker] said in response was, ‘Sorry, I cannot, Tamura. ‘Cause you’re a temp, that’s why.’” His pride as a competent worker interested in contributing to the company was injured by this rejection. He also experienced a putdown at an outdoor drinking party under the cherry blossoms, when he
was ridiculed by a permanent employee for working as a temp at his age. It was this kind of treatment that often served as a wake-up call for workers who had come to bear sincere interest in working hard.

Another moment that triggered the workers’ re-evaluation of their investment was dismissal. Devotion of mind and body to the work was placed in stark contrast to the lack of commitment the management had for the temp workers, leading the workers to doubt the devotion they had developed. Kida, a high school graduate in his late twenties who had temped for an auto-parts maker for four years, viewed himself as a devoted worker. One day his mother fell fatally ill. Kida asked his agent to give him several days off to visit his hospitalized mother, the only relative he had been maintaining contact with. The answer given by the agent was, “Then can you quit? I will have to bring in a replacement.” Four years of service, and this is what he received in return. “If I think of my devotion now, it was absurd indeed.”

Enomoto recalled her devotion in a similar fashion. “How stupid it was of me to work that hard.” She had been taken in by the work so much as to ask for a clock on the wall when the factory manager asked her for any change she wanted to see on the shop floor. Instead of asking for anything else, she asked that a clock be placed where she could see it from her position so that she (and thus the company) would not lose production time by having to rush all the way to the end of the floor where the clock currently hung. During her eight years of service, Enomoto had come to bear the company goal of productivity improvement as her personal goal. She was genuinely taken in by the challenge of devising ways to increase the productivity of lipstick lines, applying them and seeing herself reflected in the rise of production numbers. However,
during the financial crisis that began in the fall of 2008, she found herself dismissed while the permanent employees remained on the job.

Summary

This chapter examined the individual forms of worker agency observed among factory temp workers. In particular, I raised the question of why temp workers would work so hard when management has so little to offer in return. By borrowing theoretical concepts from Bourdieu, I outlined a mechanism that explained why and how temp workers work so hard. The temp workers I met entered a field of high job insecurity in which workers were released and replaced unless they proved their capacity and willingness to work up to the standards of the user client. Facing the real fear of dismissal, the workers worked hard to learn the ropes of factory work. Aside from this reason, which is well explained by the “coercion” thesis, novice temp workers were also ridiculed as incompetent, useless workers, and thus the “consent” thesis also provides an explanation via the rewards available to temp workers for their hard work, such as winning recognition. Other reasons to work hard were the hegemonic understanding of work, that any worker should give their best when they are given a job. Hard work was inherently a moral virtue. Such cultural value also led these temp workers to work hard, especially when education in Japan cherished the value of hard work for the sake of it (doryoku) and the value of perseverance (gaman). Finally, the assembly system was technically designed to tease out maximum output regardless of those who worked on it. Those structural and cultural factors all shaped the temp workers’ initial willingness to work hard. As a consequence of investing their minds and bodies in improving on the job,
the workers acquired proficiency in factory work (*practical sense*), becoming able to perform the task in an automatic fashion as a bodily response (*body automatism*).

The byproduct of acquiring the practical sense was the embodiment of genuine interest and preoccupation in perfecting the art of factory work. Workers came to experience joy in bringing creativity and individuality to the job. They came to appreciate the fact that they were able to contribute and make a difference in the world by bringing their creativity into the job. The temp workers’ engagement and investment in the job had the effect of transforming estranged labor into something more human and intimate, which became seductive, leading the workers to commit more deeply. Similar patterns of participation can be observed among workers who work under other difficult situations. Housemaids from Harlem in Dill’s (1988) study framed their job as “an art,” exhorting themselves to “make their jobs rewarding” (37). Sharone’s (2007) full-time job seekers were “absorbed” in the game of job searching, inwardly consumed by the maneuvers and strategies used to construct a marketable self despite unemployment being a structural issue. Stacey (2005) gave examples of home care workers who, despite the low pay, industriously involved their psyche in perfecting the job of bath-giving.

However, factory temp workers were not wholesale believers in the game of hard work. They were not happy workers solely devoted to their jobs. Rather, they questioned their commitment, and suffered deeply from self-reflection. While they switched themselves on at work, entering into the “zone” or “being one with the work,” they bore critical understanding of the discriminatory treatment they received from the management, and were able to look outside-in at their own commitment. In other words, the temp
workers’ daily lives on the shop floor were characterized by the ambivalent emotions of joy and suffering caused by being “in and out” of the *illusio*.

It is this very suffering caused by the discriminatory treatment, especially abrupt dismissal, that led workers to seek collective redress by contacting a labor union that organize nonstandard workers. Some faced sheer economic difficulty, facing homelessness. Some suffered from anger in the way the management showed little commitment that stood in stark contrast to the commitment they bore in doing quality work.
In the previous chapter, I analyzed the ways in which temp workers managed and responded to the working conditions they faced. The dominant form of response was an individualistic, private, and atomized effort in making the job good for themselves, such as persevering through the physical strain and self-learning the knacks of factory work to embody the necessary skills, which led to experiencing joy in seeing one’s hard-won effort reflected on the quality output they have come to yield. On the other hand, temp workers also suffered gravely from the dissonance they recognized between the effort they displayed on the shop floor and the treatment they received as cheap, replaceable workers. This chapter looks into the collective forms of worker agency by focusing on how temp workers who have been engaged hitherto in the atomized, private struggle for survival came into contact with labor unions and began to engage in collective forms of struggles on the issues surrounding temp work, such as illegal usage of temp workers, abrupt dismissals, and homelessness.

While I was in the field, the financial crisis originating from Wall Street affected the Japanese manufacturing industry in the fall of 2008, which resulted in the mass dismissal of factory temp workers. One after another, major manufacturing firms began to announce the dismissal of temp workers they had been using on their shop floors. The popular press covered news about these dismissed temp workers falling into homelessness as they lost their dormitory housing along with the job. On New Year’s
Eve of 2008, Hibiya Park, which is located centrally in the bureaucratic district of downtown Tokyo, suddenly turned into an emergency refugee camp providing food and shelter to hundreds of dismissed temp workers. The Temp Village Action Committee (TVAC), an ad hoc coalition of labor unions and civil society groups, erected the Village with the dual purpose of offering social services while public offices remained closed for the holiday and a social movement purpose of making visible the consequence of state-sanctioned labor deregulation policies. In January 2009, with the consent of the leadership, I became a member of a labor union (one of the members of TVAC) as a researcher to study from the inside how workers as a collective were responding to the emerging crisis. Labor unions have been shrinking, as demonstrated in the steadily declining unionization rate since 1949, reaching its bottom in 2013 at 17.9%, while the total number of employees has continued to increase. However, unions that organize the irregular, contingent workers have been increasing recently; the unionization rate for part-timers has risen over the last decade, from 2.2% of all part-timers in 2002 to 6.3% in 2013 (Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare 2013). I joined one of these unions that organize the nonstandard workers. In addition to participating in the union’s activities, I interviewed labor activists from other labor unions involved with temp work issues. I use data gathered on the series of protests since the fall of 2008 as a case study to examine the collective forms of workers’ agency.

I introduce the concept of “advocacy without constituency” to describe how labor unions in Japan make relatively small efforts to organize temp workers while spending much of their resources on bargaining, rallying, lobbying, and waging court struggles all aimed at bringing about social change, such as by amending the Worker Dispatching Act.
The concept of social movement unionism is gaining popularity in Japan but is practiced in significantly different ways compared to the United States, where heavy emphasis is placed on organizing the precarious workers (Fine 2005; Milkman 2000; Oh 2010; Schiavone 2007; Suzuki 2005, 2008; Voss and Sherman 2000). I show that the difference lies in the legal structure between the two countries. In the United States, the legitimacy of labor unions is legally founded upon the majority vote of the workplace, which makes community organizing a primary strategy for grievance amelioration. In contrast, only a couple of workers are necessary to form a union in Japan, and an employer must faithfully negotiate with even a single unionized employee. Japanese labor activists use this legal structure as leverage to wage struggles against the state and corporations, with a handful of professional union officers representing a miniscule number of temp workers who cared to contact the union. I then show that legal leverage also works against these unions, resulting in weak representation which does not help them win societal recognition or create a large, powerful movement. I argue that these unions form collaborative alliances and ad hoc action committees to overcome the weakness and empower their movements.

“Haken-Giri”: Abrupt Dismissal of Temp Workers

The manufacturing industry was especially impacted by the global financial crisis in fall 2008 severely impacting their profit, which led them to release the nonstandard employees from their shop floors. Figure 6.1 shows a steep drop in operating profit among the manufacturing companies in 2008. Profit was reduced to a quarter of what the industry used to make in the year before. The drop was greater than what the industry
experienced during the burst of the bubble economy during the 1990s and the IT bubble
burst in the early 2000s. Figure 6.2 shows in comparison how the manufacturing industry
was impacted more severely by the financial recession. Using temp workers for non-
skilled manual jobs in the factories was legalized in 2004 as a result of deregulating the
Worker Dispatching Act. Four years later, the temp system faced a crisis when these
temp workers were suddenly dismissed en masse and poured onto the streets.

Figure 6.1. Impact of Recessions on the Manufacturing Industry, 1960-2011

![Graph showing the impact of recessions on the manufacturing industry from 1960 to 2011.](image)


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On one end of the media discourse was the self-help/self-blame paradigm that highlighted the individual responsibility of the dismissed. Prime Minister Asō made an official visit to the Shibuya Public Employment Office in December 2008. When he took a seat in a consultation cubicle and called in a dismissed factory temp worker seeking employment, he gently reprimanded the unemployed man, saying that he ought to be a more engaged job seeker and be clear about what he wants if he really expects to land a job (Asahi Shimbun 2008). A few others such as a TV host and rising entrepreneurs made statements that reduced the issue of mass dismissal of temp workers to the individual rather than seeing in it as having a structural cause, following the ideal-typical logic of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). On the other end were news reports that interviewed the anxious worker-turned-homeless person, which were neutral in stance but
shed light on the structural defects in the temporary employment system (Mainichi
Shimbun December 18, 2008; Yomiuri Shimbun December 18, 2008).

Toyota Kyushu was one of the earliest corporations whose decision to release its
nonstandard workers was reported in the media. The corporation cut 350 temp workers in
June 2008, and then an additional 450 in August the same year. As the year approached
its end, more reports on the dismissal of nonstandard workers followed. The Ministry of
Health, Labor and Welfare announced in January 2009 that the Ministry estimated that
125,000 nonstandard workers had lost or will lose jobs between the months of October
2008 and April 2009, of which 69% or 86,000 were temporary agency workers (Ministry
of Health, Labor and Welfare 2009). The human outsourcing industry associations had
also been running their own estimates on how much of an impact the recession was going
to have on their business. They expected a larger number of temp workers to lose jobs
based on the worker dispatching contracts that were being terminated by the user clients.
The Liberal Democratic Party’s study group on worker dispatching issues invited
representatives from the Japan Production Skill Labor Association (Nihon Seisan Ginō
Rōmu Kyōkai) and the Japan Manufacturing Outsourcing Association (Nihon Seizō
Autosōshingu Kyōkai) to its meeting. The two organizations together were associations of
over 120 temporary help agencies. At the study group meeting, the industry announced
that the industry was estimating 400,000 temp workers to lose work as a result of the
financial recession.

I left the auto-parts factory in September 2008, and kept in touch with a few of
my coworkers while I continued my field research. As the crisis deepened, my former
coworkers informed me that at the factory I had worked for, the number of temp workers
working on the assembly team I was assigned to was reduced to zero by December 2008. In August of the same year, the line was running busily as noted in the earlier chapter. In fact, the factory was under-producing the promised number of engine shafts so the factory was on the verge of paying penalty for the breach of contract with the auto maker. At the meeting before the night shift one day, the team was visited by the factory management who humbly gave us some words to raise our spirits high and do our best to meet the quota. The factory was bringing in more temp workers and helpers from other factories. The line I worked on operated with 13 men. The line consisted of four regular workers (two of whom were helpers brought in from other factories) and the rest were temp workers whose numbers went up and down slightly depending on the shift. Three months later in November, the line was operated by six men. During the course of three months, the production quota has dropped from 400-500 to 80. The total number of temp workers on the line decreased to one in November, and the last temp worker who survived the November cut was released in December. The line was operated by three permanent workers in December. According to Kurosawa, the permanent worker who worked one position to my left, whom I talked to on the phone in November, a temp worker he had known and worked together with for the past four years had also been dismissed.

Kurosawa: In case of temps, your quality as a worker or the contribution you’ve made to the company doesn’t determine your fate… What matters is whether there are jobs to be done. How many workers for how much work is predetermined. And the calculation of the number of temps required is based on that. If more is needed, they are hired. If there are too many, they are released. Today’s news from (name of auto maker) on production is directly reflected on our next month’s production. The factory simply cut temps according to the decision of production decrease. It’s very fast.
In comparison, the fate of the permanent workers was decreased income. As noted in the Introduction chapter, temp workers are designed to lose jobs when permanent employees face reduced work hours or are transferred to subsidiaries. Government statistics also show that temp workers are used as disposable workers during economically difficult times (See Table 2.3 and Figure 2.3). The factory I had worked for began to operate only on a day shift from November, which led to lesser pay for workers in addition to zero overtime and weekend work. Another impact upon the permanent workers was job transfer. One of the permanent workers was transferred to another factory in Kanagawa. The line was now being operated by the rest of the three permanent workers including the team leader who was only a supervisor and a problem-solver when the line was operating at full speed.

Abrupt Dismissal as Experienced by the Temp Workers

The loss of temp jobs during the recession took the form of either early (or premature) termination of contract or non-renewal (non-extension) of contract. The temp workers that I have talked to who lost their jobs during this period understood and interpreted the fact of being abruptly dismissed in complex ways. On the one hand, they expressed disappointment, anger, and frustration with how the user clients used them as disposable workers in stark contrast to the commitment they had shown to the job. On the other hand, they harbored a sense of resignation about their experiences of losing a job and housing; temp work is made to be insecure; it’s part of the deal, and moreover it is the insecurity that makes the job available to those who cannot secure a permanent job.
Higa, a fellow temp worker who entered the factory on the same day as I did, a high school graduate in his late forties, experienced haken-giri twice during the global financial recession, once in October 2008 and then again in March 2009. On the first occasion, he received a phone call from his agent on the day he was dismissed. It was October 31 when the agent told Higa on the phone that the agency received a notification from the factory with a list of names the agency needed to remove from the factory line. The agent said therefore he is calling everyone on the list right now, and it included Higa. Work was to end at the end of this month, which was the very day the agent called Higa on the phone. The agent was quick to note that the temp agency would guarantee the next month’s pay. “I will take requests for work again in due course. I will call you back.” I asked his emotions about the abrupt dismissal he had just experienced. He answered, “I am not mad about it. It can’t be helped ("shikatanai"). The economy is so bad. The factory’s production has dropped to half. There is nothing I can do about it.”

Although the temp agency paid a month’s worth of compensation, the agent could not introduce him another place of work during this economic slump. Higa reached out to all the agents he knew from past stints through numerous temp agencies, one of which was able to find him work at a subcontractor for an electronics maker in Kanagawa prefecture. The temp agent came over to his dorm with a mini-van to take his belongings to the next dormitory. The reason why he was able to secure work in that economically difficult time was that Higa was skilled in using a soldering iron. Employment at this electronics subcontractor lasted until he was again dismissed at the end of March in 2009. When I called him in February on a Saturday, expecting him to be at home, he was at work. His workplace was busy, having him work overtime until 9 p.m. on a regular basis,
sometimes even until 11 p.m. I commented that he was working a tough schedule, to which he responded, “I am lucky. I ought to be happy.” One and a half months later he was dismissed. He was informed by the agent on March 10 that his work would end on the 15th. He was also asked to vacate the dormitory as soon as possible. The announcement caught Higa by surprise since his workplace was busy with daily overtime work. The temp agency somehow decided to extend employment until the end of March, and then dismissed him. Higa had signed his first employment contract in mid-November which was fixed until the end of January, but since then had been working without an employment contract. Employment based on flawed paperwork, some on the verge of illegality, complicated the issues arising from abrupt dismissals frequent during the financial recession of 2008-2009.

I called Uemura to hear his take on the abrupt dismissal. He was told by his temp agent three days before he was released on October 31st. Since he was a temp worker who socialized closely with the permanent workers on the line, he knew about a month beforehand that temp workers on the line were going to be released soon. Uemura said, “This is a common story. I feel no anger. You know, temps are only for busy times… You can’t help it (“shikatanai”). ”

Sakamoto, another fellow temp worker in his early thirties, was also released on October 31st. His agent came over to talk to him at the smoker’s box four to five days before the 31st to tell him work would be over at the end of the month. He told me he thought to himself about the dismissal, “that’s the way it is.” When I called him to ask about his situation, he told me “I quickly channeled my mind into thinking about the next step.” He immediately shifted gears towards securing his next job. A day of stopping,
taking a moment to think meant a day without pay. “I had no choice but to move on.” He contacted another temp agency he found on a free job advertisement magazine. The advertisement was a contract work at a cell phone factory in Kanagawa prefecture. When I called him again the next month in November, he had secured a job as a truck driver/delivery man for a well-known delivery company. He said, “I will never be temping again. I’m sick of it.”

I also talked to a few former temp workers while volunteering at the Temp Village over the new years. I first met Terauchi while I was listening to the Village Mayor Yuasa Makoto give a lecture to a group of villagers on the basic rights to welfare and the practicalities of the application process. Terauchi was one among a handful sitting on the pavement together with Yuasa, forming a cozy circle. The sun was starting to set, and the wind was getting extremely chilly. After the group had dispersed Terauchi was sitting alone on the nearby railing and I approached him and began to talk. He was about five feet five, with pitch black hair, dark complexion, and a face that made him look much younger than his actual age of thirty seven. After graduating from high school, he successfully landed a standard employment job at a cleaning company, one of the leaders in the business of providing cleaning services to offices and shopping centers. The pay was enough to rent his own apartment while his father worked as a truck driver and his mother worked part-time.

Terauchi’s life quickly deteriorated when his father was diagnosed with lymphoma that required him to take monthly shots not covered by medical insurance. The bills added up, and the subsidy he was able to receive from the municipal government was insufficient. While Terauchi was rapidly going through his savings, his mother fell
from a stroke that left the right side of her body paralyzed. Terauchi believes the mental and physical fatigue from work and care was just too much for her to handle. He decided to move into his parents’ apartment, which would also save him the cost of rent and supplement the rising medical expenses. His father passed away soon after he moved in, soon followed by his mother. After holding a minimal funeral, and vacating his parent’s rented apartment, he was left alone with no place to go and without any money.

He began using the 24-hour internet cafes as a temporary place to live. He reported to his cleaning job from there. But his employer soon found out that he had no formal address and told him the company could not continue to hire a person without proof of residence. It was from there that he entered into the world of temping. He looked back with regret, saying, “

I gave in to despair… I had become alone after losing all my family members. And I lost work, and was living without a home… I felt light-headed and lost.

Temp jobs are often grabbed by job seekers as a consequence of resorting to self-help to stay financially afloat when they are denied better employment options, as is demonstrated by government statistics. Terauchi found a daily temp job among the list of jobs that required no vita. An additional appeal was the dormitory that came with the job. He desperately needed both. He was dispatched to work at construction sites, an illegal form of temporary agency work. He built scaffolding and dug dirt until work completely dried up by September 2008.

When he could no longer pay the JPY 60,000 monthly rent, he left the dorm. He then went back to using the internet cafes, and then began a life on the street after he ran out of his savings in two months. During those two months, he applied for seven jobs but
landed none. All were part time jobs in the areas he was experienced in (cleaning and construction work), but not having a domicile or a guarantor worked against him. He also sought public assistance. When he visited the municipal government office for help, instead of guiding him to apply for welfare, the public servant began to accuse him of document forgery when Terauchi confessed that he had used an outdated residency registry to secure the construction site temp job. He took that as a threat and left the office, intimidated. He then was sent to jail after being caught stealing food at a local grocery store. He was released after several days, only to continue his life on the street until he read the news of the Temp Village in the papers discarded in a local park on New Year’s Eve. The Temp Village functioned to offer service and assistance to individuals like Terauchi, to whom the state guarantees protection on paper but has been failing to offer in practice. He was grateful that the TVAC and the volunteers were assisting him to apply for welfare collectively from the Village.

Another villager I met was Kida, a young man who was twenty nine years old. He had hair dyed brown, wore a black down jacket, and was smoking in the designated spot next to the headquarters tent. He looked like all the other young men found in any town in Japan, which pointedly reflected the issue at stake: the malfunctioning layers of safety nets for employment, social insurance, and welfare, which makes a citizen take a steep and fast drop from work to homelessness (Yuasa 2008). He was from the western region of Japan, a graduate of an evening high school who enjoyed playing basketball. The job he secured after graduation was a standard employment position as a welder. The pay was too low for him to stick with the job. He soon found another job as a scaffolding man, which did not satisfy him either. The monthly pay for both jobs was around JPY
160,000 to 180,000. He came across a job ad while he was in search of his next move. The ad boasted a monthly pay of JPY 300,000 plus a dormitory room, and did not require any relevant experience. The job sounded ideal for a man like Kida who was looking for an exit and a change for the better. It was a factory temp job for a Toyota subcontractor in Aichi prefecture, and he worked there for four years.

Then his mother, the only relative he kept in touch with and had been sending monetary support to, fell ill. She was hospitalized in critical condition. He asked the temp agency manager if he could take a short leave to visit his mother. The agent responded, as Kida put it to me, “Then can you quit? I need to bring in a replacement.” Noting my stunned expression, Kida continued: “Yeah… Exactly… There are many others like me for a quick replacement.” With a sense of resignation, he quit the job to visit his mother, who soon passed away. Kida quickly found another temp job, this time from a different temp agency that offered work at an electronics factory in Mie Prefecture. He worked there for two months, only to find himself released from work on December 20, 2008. The agent told him that his work at the factory was over and to vacate the dormitory as soon as possible. He gathered his belongings and left the dorm. With no one to depend on, he decided to head to Tokyo for employment opportunity. While spending several nights at an Internet café in Shinjuku, he stumbled upon the information about the Temp Village.

These individuals were typical of temp workers who lost both work and home during the recession. The Temp Village signaled the emergence of yet another population who are prone to be excluded from the protective institutions of employment, social security, and welfare. Enterprise unions were another protective institution from which
the temp workers were excluded. A plant manager of a manufacturing giant I interviewed, who used temp workers on his shop floor, phrased this exclusion, “We [permanent employees] live on separate boats.” The temp workers at the Village were the visual representation of what institutional failure does to workers who live on a boat that was created separately from the standard workers and was designed to sink in economically difficult times.

The Temp Village also represented the withering postwar social contract premised on political stability and economic growth. During the period of rapid economic development, the state, corporation, and their unionized workers were under an agreement that mutually designated moral roles (Schaede 2004): the state was to lead industrial growth by strategically assisting corporations; large corporations in return for such state support were to provide stable employment for their workers; and workers given the security were to remain loyal to the company and devote themselves to the company’s growth. However, as global competition intensified and Japan underwent economic stagnation during the 1990s, the state and corporations sought ways to respond flexibly to the changing business environment, which led to the growth of precarious workers working for large corporations and public offices that were premised on workers having good stable jobs. The Temp Village was an attempt to visualize the deteriorating protective institutions, to question the direction in which the postwar social contract was changing, and to push the state for a change.
Increasing Nonstandard Workers and the Rise of Alternative Unions

Part of the cause that makes temp workers a vulnerable class within the working class in Japanese society in stark contrast to the standard workers is their exclusion from the protective institutions. Historically, labor unions in Japan called “enterprise unions” have mainly developed in each corporation or enterprise and not across industries. They have sought to win job security for standard workers and eliminate the white collar versus blue collar discrimination within the corporation, while maintaining gender discrimination and excluding the nonstandard workers from union protection (Gordon 1993; Gottfried and Hayashi-Kato 1998; Imai 2011; Kawanishi 1992; Kumazawa 1996). Many of the dismissed workers relied on themselves to manage their plight, such as visiting the local employment offices and searching for work. Such atomized, individual, and isolated mode of response to crisis ran quite similar to how they struggled alone to survive while on the job. However, there were a few workers who have reached out and sought help beyond themselves.

When enterprise unions failed to protect the jobs of temp workers, it was the individual-membership based unions that came to the fore to counter the crises of dismissal and homelessness. There are two categories of such unions: general unions and community unions. General unions (gōdō rōdō kumiai) are individual membership based unions, who are usually industrial or craft unions. They predominantly organize standard workers who work for un-unionized, small-to-mid size companies. General unions are usually made up of workplace branches of these unions at particular workplaces. In addition to unionizing the un-unioned regular workers, they also organize the nonstandard workers. Community unions (komyunitī yunion) are similar to general
unions in that they welcome individuals, but have their history rooted specifically in organizing nonstandard workers. The first community union was created in the 1980s Tokyo to protect part-time workers’ rights.

I call these two types of unions alternative unions because from the standpoint of nonstandard workers, they serve as an alternative to enterprise unions from which non-standard workers are usually excluded. These unions are alternative because they exist outside the corporation and reside in geographic communities, which make them accessible to workers who work inside the corporation yet live in the insecure periphery of the Japanese labor market that exists outside the protected core of regular employees. Unlike enterprise unions that base their membership on employees with full corporate citizenship (usually at workplaces with a union shop agreement), these unions welcome all types of workers from all workplaces, including part-timers and temporary agency workers who fall outside enterprise union protection but (therefore) are most likely to face issues due to their insecure and unprotected status. It is in this context of increasing nonstandard workers that individual membership-based unions began to gain prominence as an alternative protective institution.

Japanese labor laws enable these alternative unions to flourish. In the United States, labor unions operate on the logic of the majority, while laws in Japan enable small groups of minority workers to win legal rights as labor unions. In the United States, the usual process of winning certification as a legitimate bargaining unit that the employer must recognize is that the workers concerned must first gather signatures from other workers at the workplace to show that at least 30% of the workplace wishes to form a labor union. The signature cards are then submitted to the local National Labor Review
Board office with a letter of intent to form a union, after which the NLRB will administer a ballot election. Every member of the workplace takes part in the election, and if the union is able to win the majority vote, the union becomes certified. It is after becoming certified by the NLRB that the union becomes a group the employer must negotiate with in good faith. In Japan, the Labor Union Act requires two workers to form a labor union. The Act stipulates that the labor union must be formed voluntarily by workers for the purpose of maintaining and improving the working conditions. The group becomes a labor union when it notifies the employer with the name of the union and an address. The union formation process does not involve the logic of the majority or a certification process. Labor unions in Japan must have a union constitution that fulfill certain conditions and rules to enjoy the legal rights as a labor union, such as holding a general meeting every year, holding elections in choosing officers, and having an accountant process the financial matters of the union to be disclosed to all members. Otherwise, regardless of whether the union wins the recognition of the majority of workers or not, the employer must negotiate with the union in good faith. Such legal leverage in Japan enables a single worker vs. large corporation battle.

Structural changes in the labor market are only part of the reason why alternative unions are becoming important organizations advocating the nonstandard workers’ well-being. These alternative unions are oriented towards organizing the unprotected (Oh 2010; Suzuki 2008) and also are disposed to using extra-institutional means to bring about social change (Kojima 2012). Whereas enterprise unions have gradually receded from the streets and back into their offices since the consolidation of labor during the 1980s, these alternative unions are still active both on the streets and in formal dispute
settlement institutions. For example, 69% of arbitration cases brought to the Labor Board in 2008 were by these alternative unions, which have continued to increase annually (Oh 2010:61). National labor confederations such as Rengō and Zenrōren have been slow in responding to the growth of nonstandard workers but now have also begun to form their own individual membership-based unions. Oh (2010) calls such recent growth of alternative unions a “renaissance” of labor. Nakamura (2011) similarly sees such growth as having the potential to resurrect the declining influence of labor.

**Structural Hindrances**

While alternative unions appear destined to become prominent advocates for the increasing nonstandard workers, these unions also hold characteristics that do not necessarily help them become or remain active. For one, these unions tend to be small in size (Nakamura 2011; Suzuki 2008). According to the survey on individual membership-based unions (Ohara Shakai Mondai Kenkyujo 2010), their average membership size is 292 members, with 43% of them having less than 50 members. Another similar survey on individual membership unions gives a smaller average of 221.2 (Oh 2010:52). Although 292 is larger than the national average of 178.7 for all unions for the same year (Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare 2013), the participation rate of members in the union’s activities concerning community and societal issues is low. A survey shows that 43% of individual-membership unions see less than 20% of their members participate in the union’s movement activities such as on peace, politics, and gender issues (Ohara Shakai Mondai Kenkyujo 2010:16).
It is not so surprising to see little participation from the rank and file union members; many have a full-time job, a family and various other constraints that hinder participation. This is why full time professional staff are hired, which is one good measure of the union’s wealth in resources. The average number of such professional staff is small at 1.5 persons per union (Ohara Shakai Mondai Kenkyujo 2010:21; Oh 2010:64). This is related to the second disadvantage these unions face in functioning as active organizations; they are financially weak (Suzuki 2008:501). A little less than half of the unions surveyed have an annual budget of less than JPY 1 million (Ohara Shakai Mondai Kenkyujo 2010:22), which makes it difficult for the union to hire paid staff. Three-quarters of these unions survive on a budget of less than JPY 3 million (ibid). The majority found their budget to be either “tight” or “extremely tight” (Oh 2010:59). As a result, the limited number of professional staff work long hours, many of them over eight hours a day and more than five days a week (ibid:60). Hence, those who participate in the union’s activities, such as collective bargaining, phone and in-person consultation, and social movements events, usually are limited to a small number of full time staff plus a handful of rank and file members who put in time voluntarily.

Then how do these relatively small and poor unions make themselves into active figures in the contemporary Japanese social movement scene? The answer is networking. Studies on social movements have hitherto shown that inter-organizational networking and coalition-building is a significant part of movement emergence and development (McAdam 1999). The social movement network literature regards networks as causal, and finds that networks both enable and constrain action (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Studies have shown that networks facilitate movements to rise and protest activities to
peak (Osa 2003). Alliances and coalitions raise the movements’ capacity to make impacts on public policy (Knoke et al. 1996). Larger resources render organizations more visible and powerful, which provides incentives to build coalitions. However, creating alliances and coalitions is not a simple job; it is often problematic and conflict-ridden, especially when organizations are divided by political-ideological rifts. In such contexts, organizations that serve as a bridge between organizations are termed social brokers (Diani 2003). These unions play the role of social brokers and capitalize on their pre-existing ties by creating ad hoc alliances to organize large events to impact politics, thus momentarily crossing the rift that exists between organizations. From the individual participants’ standpoint, the dense network of groups and individuals that these unions maintain come to be shared by the newly participating individual, which then serves as an important resource for individuals to build their own groups and organize protest activities.

**Haken Mura, or the Temp Village**

The Temp Village, erected at Hibiya Park in central Tokyo, was held from December 31, 2008 to January 5 2009 and helped over 500 villagers. The location was deliberately chosen by the TVAC because the park was located right across from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. The Hibiya Shell located in the park is also known for a place where political rallies are held. As I entered the park from the southwest gate across from the Ministry building, the sight of labor union flags tied to the poles near the Hibiya Shell entrance gate caught my eye. The flags were of Rengō, Zenrōkyō, and Zenrōren and their affiliated unions. This was a sign that the Temp Village
was a collaborative effort that crossed political borders. The coalition also included officers of non-profit organizations and cause lawyers who were experts on poverty issues. The nature of the coalition was manifest inside the Temp Village’s headquarters tent. Labor union officials sat at the Labor Consultation table for villagers who discussed their cases of dismissal, unpaid wages and benefits, and possible illegal use of their labor. Besides the labor specialists, there were lawyers who have been offering legal assistance in securing welfare support for the needy. They gathered necessary information from the villagers and collectively filed for public assistance for 280 villagers (Tokairin 2009:98). Villagers who were facing debt problems were led to legal experts offering assistance to relieve debts. Some villagers arrived at the park in bad health condition. NPO officers from homeless support groups mobilized their expert knowledge in dealing with individuals who needed medical attention. Outside the tent, I could hear from afar a loudspeaker announcement for what the voice called “sentō kōdō.” It was a young activist from the Freeter Union (another participating alternative union) taking a group of Village residents to a nearby bath house. Phonetically, sentō mean both “public bathhouse” and “battle.”

The Temp Village headquarters also enlisted individual volunteers like myself, who were given bandanas to distinguish volunteers from the villagers. Donations in the form of money, food, and clothing were brought to the tent. The event gathered close to 1,700 volunteers and accumulated donations of JPY 43 million (Tokairin 2009:98). Behind the headquarters tent, a group of volunteers of various ages sat in a circle around a pile of cooked rice and a Tupperware container full of pitted umeboshi, making rice balls. Boxes of root vegetables and fruits such as carrots, radishes, and apples were
stacked near a tree while bags of *miso* and bottles of *shoyu* were sorted on a blue tarp. Volunteers were also in charge of coordinating the unexpectedly large turn-out of volunteers. They distinguished themselves with hand-made signs attached to their chests that read “Leader” and “Sub-Leader.” I was instructed at the headquarters tent to find one of these “Leaders” to be assigned a task. Thus the collaborative efforts of the Temp Village included these volunteers and community donations.

**Network Brokerage**

The Temp Village Action Committee that organized the event was a group of labor union activists, non-profit experts on poverty issues, cause lawyers, and a journalist. At the Village’s opening ceremony, looking at the union members belonging to Rengō, Zenrōren, and Zenrōkyō standing side by side along with the NPO officers and independent unions, the former Rengō chairperson Sasamori Kiyoshi called this collaborative effort “epochal.” Natsume Ichirō, a member of the TVAC and a cause lawyer on labor issues, called the coalition “a new stage in the labor movement (Tōkairin 2009:34).” Moreover, labor union leaders look back at this event and say, “The [Village] would not have been possible, or at least would have been disastrous, if it wasn’t for these experts on poverty issues.” Kawazoe Makoto of SSU attributed the existence of the event to the nature of its coalition of diverse organizations. It was members of alternative unions together with a lawyer and a journalist who had created the inclusive TVAC coalition.

The national labor confederations had the largest resources to wage struggles to protect the nonstandard workers’ rights. However, as noted earlier, the consolidation of
labor in the 1980s resulted in the division and weakening of unions as oppositional forces to managerial initiatives. In addition, powerful members of these confederations were often enterprise unions that excluded nonstandard workers from their membership, which symbolized the vertical separation of the working class. It was significant for the alternative unions, who have been struggling for the well-being of nonstandard workers yet suffering from weak clout, to have these large confederations take a stand in improving the nonstandard workers’ plight. On the other hand, despite sharing similar concerns about the nonstandard workers, communication among the alternative unions remained selective and limited, creating a lateral division among the working class. It was these multi-dimensional divisions shaping the complex relationships among labor unions that members of an alternative union network attempted to bridge.

In order to create a large-scale movement and counter the deregulatory trend of labor policies, a small group of general unions and community unions called the Zenkoku Union (JCUF) mobilized their network to organize an intra-union action committee. JCUF and its member unions have been longstanding advocates of nonstandard workers. Its member the Temp Work Network (Haken Rōdō Nettowāku) is a non-profit that has been working closely with Tokyo Union (a community union) in hearing the voices of temp workers by opening “hotlines” to which temp workers from anywhere could call and consult about their working conditions. They began this support at the time when temp work was primarily flexible work for women with marketable skill sets. As temp work began to expand into the non-skilled, routine labor in offices as well as on the shop floors during the late 1990s to early 2000s, these groups created the Temp Union (Haken Yunion) in 2005 to specifically target the un-regulated expansion and deterioration of the
quality of temp work. Haken Union’s professional staff-person Sekine Shūichirō registered himself as a temp worker to have a sneak-peak into the realities of day labor temping (Sekine 2009). The union organized temps employed by the temp agency Goodwill, which has been running afoul of the law by practices such as skimming off bogus fees from workers’ wages and dispatching workers to workplaces banned by law.

These preceding initiatives led into the summer of 2008 when the Labor Policy Council, the tri-partite advisory council for the Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare where labor laws are drafted, submitted to the Minister a revision draft of the Worker Dispatching Act (WDA). JCUF and other labor unions such as Zenrōren, who found the draft to be unsatisfactory to improve the temp workers’ lives, began to organize rallies in opposition to the draft independently within their own capacity. It was in this context of growing oppositional movements that union officers of JCUF strategized to create a cross-border action committee. Members of the JCUF Kamo Momoyo and Abe Makoto visited labor lawyer Natsume’s office to discuss the need to start building a coalition to maximize labor mobilization (Natsume 2009:201). Natsume and JCUF already had close ties, as Natsume had been representing JCUF in their legal cases against McDonald’s Japan and the temp agency Goodwill. JCUF already had active ties with other alternative unions, such as Zen Nikken, which is an industrial general union. These unions were also aware of the existence of other alternative unions that have recently become active in nonstandard employment issues, such as Shutoken Seinen Yunion (SSU) and Tokyo Tōbu Rōso (TTR) that belonged to different political currents of Zenrōren and Zenrōkyō respectively. Including the alternative unions of SSU and TTR in the coalition enabled them to pull the strings of the national union confederations Zenrōren and Zenrōkyō as
well, for SSU and TTR could serve the role of social brokers between the JCUF and the confederations from the other side of the rift if conflicts arose.

The ad hoc alliance-building effort by JCUF enabled the formation of the coalition Joint Action for Worker Dispatching Act Reform (Rōdōsha Hakenhō no Bappon Kaisei o Mezasu Kyōdō Kōdō) in the autumn of 2008. By this time, the air of recession was already being felt. The coalition consisted of unions with membership in the three confederations that shared the goal of re-regulating the Worker Dispatching Act. The Joint Action coalition held a rally at the Hibiya Shell on December 4th, 2008. The open-air arena gathered alternative unions and members of the three confederations. On stage, representatives from all of the opposition parties sat next to each other, which reflected the brokering effort by the alternative unions to bridge the schism among the labor unions and political parties to create a large-scale “social” movement beyond the narrow framing of a “labor” movement.

The Temp Village Action Committee was a direct sequel to this Joint Action coalition framework. The addition to the Joint Action coalition for the TVAC was individuals from non-profits and civil society groups that had been dealing with the rising issue of poverty in Japan. While the alternative union members felt the need to do something over the New Year holiday to save the lives of dismissed temp workers-turned-homeless, they lacked the practical knowledge to do so. It was then that the members of the JCUF leadership tapped on the shoulders of NPO officers whom they already knew, who were experts in saving the lives of people living on the street. A handful of activists and legal experts had been forming an advocacy group called the Anti-Poverty Network since 2007. The TVAC was based on the Joint Action coalition
that came to involve many of the Anti-Poverty Network members, whose memberships overlapped substantially. The TVAC was an effort that began with a group of alternative unions, a labor lawyer, and a journalist, which expanded the circle to other alternative unions and national union confederations under the Joint Action coalition, and then to non-profit organizations with expert knowledge on poverty issues.

The key framework that linked the mass dismissal of temp workers and the anti-poverty groups was the endangered right to life guaranteed in the Article 25 of the Constitution. At the press conference held on January 2nd 2009, the TVAC demanded proactive measures from the state by framing the situation of the Temp Village as “the right to life being jeopardized” (Sekine 2009:40). In the words of Utsunomiya Kenji, the Temp Village’s Honorary Mayor and the representative of the Anti-Poverty Network, the overarching issue at stake in contemporary Japanese society, represented by the temp workers becoming homeless, is whether “we let poverty grow, or create a society in which people can work like people, and live as human beings” (Utsunomiya and Yuasa 2009:44). It was this larger framework of poverty, in addition to the brokerage effort by the alternative unions that enabled the TVAC coalition.

**Let’s Go Meet the Automaker CEO Tour**

If the Temp Village Action Committee was about large-scale networking that cut across the divides and was inclusive of cause lawyers, non-profit officers and civic volunteerism, there is also small-scale networking only among the alternative unions for the purpose of conducting ad hoc social movement events such as the Let’s Go Meet the Automaker CEO Tour (*Jidōshagaisha no Shachōsan ni Aitai Tsuā*) held on June 2nd 2009.
The tour was organized by three alternative unions involved in ongoing court struggles against automakers regarding the legally questionable usage and dismissal of temporary workers during the financial crisis.

Zen Nikken, an independent industrial general union, was battling with Hino Truck to rescind the dismissal of its fixed term contract workers. JMIU, a Zenrōren-affiliated industrial general union, was in disputes with Nissan, Isuzu Truck, and Honda, over the agency temporaries and contract workers they had released. SSU, a Zenrōren-affiliated community union, was in dispute with Mitsubishi Fuso over the temp workers they had dismissed. This event was an effort to bring together scattered efforts of court struggles waged against the automakers that symbolize the Japanese manufacturing industry’s usage of nonstandard workers.

As noted earlier, the strength of these alternative unions lies in their capacity and willingness to undertake individual nonstandard workers’ grievances. One of the reasons why the value of these unions is rising at present is because their broad membership cuts across workplaces and employment status. What enable such struggles is the Japanese labor laws that do not follow the principle of the majority as is the case of the U.S. However, this legal leverage available for alternative unions in Japan is directly linked to the drawback they face, which is their lack of representativeness. Because unions are not required to (or because they simply cannot) organize the majority, unions often embark on a struggle with only a handful of workers, which is not helpful in creating visibility or societal recognition. For example, among the five hundred nonstandard workers that were released in December 2008 from Mitsubishi Fuso, SSU was able to unionize two men. For Isuzu Truck, JMIU unionized twelve out of fourteen hundred nonstandard workers
dismissed by the end of 2008. Hence, the scale of each independent struggle is small, with a weak momentum that reflects the number of workers represented by these unions.

In the face of such weak representation, alternative unions actively use the mass media as an amplifier of their cause and effort. When unions plan a movement event, they usually contact the media beforehand. For example, Shutoken Seinen Union (SSU) sends its monthly newsletter to every journalist they have come into contact with, in addition to faxing them information prior to each event. In late 2008 to early 2009, haken-giri or the dismissal of temp workers was one of the hottest issues with lots of attention from the media. SSU had no difficulty mobilizing the media in the earlier period of struggle when they hosted an event by themselves, such as the one held on December 24th 2008. The union took a group of journalists to show the dormitory of Mitsubishi Fuso Truck where one of the union members was in a sense “squatting” or disobeying the order to leave the dorm after he had been released. The event was lively, with five or six journalists including a tv camera covering the event. However, as time passed, the interest shown by the media on nonstandard employment issue began to wane. For one, journalists generally do not cover similar stories from the same source. Secondly, the waning media interest seemed to reflect the general public losing interest, feeding into each other’s downward spiral of interest. On January 27th, SSU held a similar rally alone in front of the Mitsubishi Fuso headquarters. Only one national newspaper journalist came to cover the story. On February 26th, another rally in front of the same headquarters was held, and again the union was only able to capture the interest of one regional newspaper journalist.
It was in this context that the Automaker CEO Tour was organized. For one, it was a new event to regain media attention and have them cover temp work issues when public interest was declining by the middle of 2009. Unions needed to do something new and catchy that would provide substantive materials for the media to carry in their papers. Secondly, it was a way to share limited resources by bringing together each group’s hitherto isolated efforts. Thirdly, the event was a response to the auto industry reinstating the hiring of nonstandard workers, as sales were beginning to pick up again thanks to a government subsidy program for customers buying eco-friendly cars.

Koyano Takeshi of Zen Nikken contacted Kawazoe of SSU and Miki Ryoichi, the secretary general of JMIU to create an event together by bringing in unions that were waging struggles against auto companies. In discussing how to make collaboration possible, the three union leaders decided to frame the coalition not as a united front of the three labor unions but as a group forming a sōgidan, which is a kind of ad hoc labor action group often formed for workers’ struggles without labor unions, a prime case being the San’ya Sōgidan for the day laborers in the San’ya district of Tokyo. This was a way to minimize potential oppositional reactions from the top executives of their respective parent unions, especially when the coalition crossed the political-historical fissure between the old left and the new left. The organizers played down their union affiliations and emphasized what they shared in common, their ongoing labor disputes with automakers and their interest in empowering each other through this collaborative event. Hence, such ad hoc coalitions are created by managing the subtle politics that are relics of the past yet still loom over the heads of present day union activists.
The tour was inspired by Michael Moore’s tactic of visiting a non-responsive opponent and opening a dialogue to capture the gist of the issue on camera. The system of temporary agency work is a triadic relationship in which users of temp workers labor (in this case the automakers) and the employers of temp workers are legally separated. The former is exempt from the legal responsibility to deal with labor union demands from the temp workers because they are not the *de jure* employers even though in practice they determine the temp workers’ fate by making decisions on hiring and firing. Many of these manufacturing industries had closed their doors to labor unions supporting temp workers based on this reason. The coalition decided to visit the automakers with a camera and a host of journalists, including Asahi, Mainichi and Yomiuri newspapers, Jiji press, Bloomberg, Deutsche Press, and several other labor union newspapers. The group had also invited a professional comedian known for political satire named Matsumoto Hiro. Matsumoto’s role was to act as a news reporter playing dumb and asking simple questions, “What is the problem?” “Who are you?” “Why won’t you talk with the workers?” SSU had a union member who was an art school graduate, and she meticulously created decorative placards that read “See Me” and “Talk to Me” which the union members held up with their hands. Such performance certainly made the tour more upbeat and colorful for the tour participants, and created photogenic scenes for the accompanying journalists covering the event.

It was one of the last sunny days before the month-long rainy season. Union members were already gathered by 8:45 at the west exit of the Kawasaki train station, creating islands among themselves. As they arrived, they made greetings to each group and then joined the circle of their own union. The union leaders were chatting among
themselves, while journalists as they arrived stopped by to pay their respects to the union leaders. Five minutes after the assembly time, the three groups formed one big circle together. Koyano Takeshi opened the meeting with a greeting. After taking roll, which served as a sort of introduction, he stated the purpose of the day’s collaborative action.

“How dare you!” “You bastards!” That’s the way we tend to speak. And such language usually promotes defection rather than communication. Ring a familiar bell? (laughter)...But, did any of you receive a compassionate, polite explanation when you were dismissed?...Companies like Hino Truck even had the workers sign a letter of resignation as if it was the workers who were asking to be released. What is going on here?...We demand explanation. Why dismissal? Why are we not talking on matters that ordinary people find puzzling? Hence, (holding up the placards) “See Me,” “Let’s Talk.”

On the bus en route to the corporate head offices, each worker was handed a microphone to briefly describe his or her case to the rest on the bus. The first stop was Mitsubishi Fuso. Kawazoe Makoto, the secretary general of SSU, explained that the two union members today on the bus had been working for the company as agency temporaries and had been dismissed in Dec. 2008. The two were among the five hundred nonstandard employees that were dismissed, and there is a high likelihood that the company had been using these two workers in violation of the Worker Dispatching Act. Fellow passengers on board listened to Kawazoe’s explanation of the case, a plight that was shared by others on the bus. The microphone was then handed to Hara, a high school graduate in his mid thirties who temped for one of the truck companies.

I presume many of us here share a similar sort of anger…the question I have is, the company could not have sustained itself unless they released us? That’s what I would like to hear from them today. Was the company really about to fail unless? The justification they give us is financial reason…but I want to know the truth. Thank you. (clap)
The bus stopped at the glittering high rise headquarters of each automaker, and the group of about forty people got off the bus. Union members unfolded their banners and flags, while journalists opened their shoulder bags and pulled out their notepads and voice recorders. Of course, the coalition saw none of the CEOs. Instead, in each location they found company representatives waiting outside the building entrance accompanied by security guards. The typical pattern of interaction that unfolded between the two sides was like skew lines, each speaking in linear directions in response to each other’s claims but without hopes for intersection. Unions demanded the user companies to sit at a negotiation table with them and reinstate the dismissed temp workers. The company representatives’ responses were clear: “We are not representatives of the company, but will listen to whatever you have to say today.” The automakers were reluctant to establish the fact that they had officially negotiated with labor unions and to admit that there exists a legal employer-employee relationship. This event based on a coalition among alternative unions did not produce any tangible, immediate result, but it allowed the participants to experience the presence of other union members undergoing similar hardships and battling over similar cases, and reaffirmed the importance of continuing on with their movements in the making.

Summary

Nonstandard workers who are excluded from labor union protection are increasing. Part of the job insecurity is caused by the lack of institutional protections that the permanent regular workers enjoy. While the overall union density is declining, given the rise in workers excluded from union protection, individual-membership based unions
that organize nonstandard workers are beginning to gain significance. However, these alternative unions face structural hindrances: they are small in size and have weak financial footholds. Yet, these unions have become visible organizations actively dealing with the growing issues of nonstandard workers. These labor unions attempt to overcome their structural disadvantages by connecting with other labor unions and civil society groups. The Temp Village Action Committee demonstrates that alternative unions serve as a bridge that crosses the existing divisions within the labor movement to create ad hoc alliances for maximum clout in bringing about social change. They strategically involve non-profits to transcend the narrow interests of “labor” and frame their movement as a society-wide movement that concerns all. The Automaker CEO Tour was an illustration of a much smaller scale mobilization of networking only amongst the alternative unions. The ad hoc coalition was a strategic collaboration to regain the momentum of movements for temp workers dismissed from automobile companies when social attention and interest in the issue was on the decline. In order to coalesce their efforts, each union played down the differences that existed among them and capitalized on what they shared in common.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined the ways in which the Japanese employment system is becoming increasingly insecure, and analyzed how workers are negotiating and responding to precarious forms of employment. The growth of nonstandard workers living on insecure and underpaid jobs with limited benefits is one of the primary challenges facing many industrialized countries. I focused specifically on the blue collar temporary agency workers who work at factories run by large Japanese manufacturing firms that many of the readers mostly likely have heard of through their products consumed globally. These jobs best symbolize the neoliberal order emerging in the contemporary world of work. Corporations are free to use their labor power while being relieved of many of the legal employer responsibilities. Contracts are maintained short-term, and renewal is dependent on the client’s demand. Workers are hired by the companies to maintain labor force flexibility; they serve as buffer to protect the regular workers’ jobs during economically difficult times. All in all, they typify the “just-in-time” workers who are hired as disposable workers while working the same jobs as the permanent workers.

Previous studies on Japanese blue collar workers focused on the regular workers. During the period of rapid economic development, the Japanese corporations institutionalized what can be termed as the “Japanese way of management,” characterized by seniority-based pay, life-long (permanent) employment, and enterprise unionism. By providing stable employment and wages that increased with years of service, the management was able to tease out commitment and loyalty from these workers. The workers envisioned and built an upwardly mobile career out of serving the company until
retirement. The enterprise unions were symbolic of the paternalistic, reciprocal relationship that bound the management and the workers; they exchanged commitment and participation with job security.

Japanese corporations maintain labor force flexibility by sacrificing the female workers’ and the temporary workers’ jobs, while protecting the “male-breadwinner jobs” by rotating and transferring the permanent workers within the corporate group. They also used labor provided by a third party without legal grounds, both for blue collar factory jobs and pink collar clerical jobs, which reflected the continuing needs for more flexibility. As Japanese companies faced increased global competition in the context of the decade long recession during the 1990s, they decidedly steered towards a more explicit and comprehensive use of nonstandard workers while becoming more restrictive and selective in hiring regular workers on an open-ended contract. Legal deregulations by the state that eased the usage of nonstandard workers paved the way for the increase in nonstandard workers among the employed population, as we clearly see in the statistics. However, the nature of deregulation was not a complete overhaul of the employment system towards flexibility; the importation of flexibility into the Japanese world of work was limited and targeted. Temporary agency work was legalized and deregulated while maintaining the protective institutions of permanent employment and seniority-based wage system, which resulted in the emergence of a dual labor market where the line of inequality is drawn between the regular workers and the nonstandard workers.

I showed that temporary agency work in Japan is particularly a bad job compared to temporary agency work in other industrialized capitalist societies. Compared with their European and American counterparts, the gap between the temp workers and the regular
workers in Japan is wide in terms of earnings, job security, and prospects for upward mobility. I argued that the cause of this difference lies in the unique way in which the Japanese government chose to control the growth of labor supply business. The state made temporary agency work legal by imposing restrictions on the usage of temp workers, whereas the European Union imposed regulations based on the principle of equal treatment. The Japanese government imposed regulations on the usage of temp workers to protect the permanent workers’ jobs. The state regulated temp work not for the purpose of protecting the well-being of the temp workers, but to prevent them from interfering with jobs where job and wage securities were intact. Therefore, this rather unique way of regulation was in response to the tightly closed internal labor market that characterized the Japanese labor market.

When temp work was first legalized, the Worker Dispatching Act was founded upon the principle that employment should be a permanent, dyadic relationship between the employer and the employee, and temp work was only to be used as an exception to this rule and never as a replacement for permanent, stable employment. However, as global competition intensified during the decade long recession, the Japanese way of regulating temp workers gradually eroded. The restrictions on the usage of temp workers were lifted in the series of the deregulation of the Worker Dispatching Act through the 1990s and into the early 2000s, allowing temp workers to be used for non-skilled, routine manual tasks in the factories. The consequence of lifting the restrictions was the growth of precarious workers who are unprotected by the “equal treatment” principle that temporary workers in Europe enjoy. Many workplaces, especially at large corporations, saw the increase of workers who are paid significantly less than the regular workers for
doing the same job, without job security, enjoying little benefits, and suffering from cultural stigma.

It is in this context of the transformation of the Japanese labor market that I analyzed the particular ways in which temp workers negotiate and respond to these “bad jobs,” based on participant observation and interviews. I examined the patterns of insecure workers’ responses to precarious employment arrangements, both individually and collectively. Previous studies on nonstandard workers in Japan have documented the macro historical transformation of employment relationships and the driving forces behind the change (Imai and Sato 2011, Imai 2011). The literature also examines how the locally embedded institutions filter the global pressure for flexibilization of labor in producing a young cohort of nonstandard workers (Brinton 2011; Genda 2001). Another important group of studies, especially within Japanese sociology, examine the multiple dimensions and the degrees of inequality present between standard and nonstandard workers using large data sets (Arita 2009; Sato 2009; Taromaru 2009, 2011). However, despite much excellent work on the structural transformation of employment relations, the institutions under attack, and the extent of inequality, how marginality is experienced and responded to by the workers remained understudied. Understanding the mechanisms of insecure workers’ agency and its specific forms is an urgent agenda in the field of sociology of work (Kalleberg 2009). This study was an attempt to fill this important lacuna.

Temp jobs are structured in a way that appeals to job seekers who see no better alternatives in the restricted job market. While we know much about how job seekers are pushed to take temp jobs against their wish to land a permanent job, we have known little
about the “pull factors.” I argued that finding and securing factory temp work is like satisfying hunger at a fast-food restaurant. Because Japanese corporations predominantly recruit regular workers annually freshly out of school, employment opportunity for mid-career job seekers is relatively limited. Temp jobs are simply more frequently available for such job seekers without highly marketable skills. Temp jobs are also easily accessible. Temp agencies screen job seekers minimally in offering them jobs. Temp agencies also offer jobs fast. Just-in-time dispatching of workers is the key to successful labor supply business, and speed is reflected in the way job seekers are offered work. Temp agencies also offer dormitory housing and loan money to those in need, which are akin to drinks and fries that come with the burger, and make temp jobs relatively more appealing.

Once dispatched to the client companies’ factories, temp workers enter a race for survival. In contrast to the ease of securing factory temp work, the fresh workers must prove their aptitude in factory work while they are examined and tested by the user clients. Workers who do not perform up to the client companies’ standard are quickly removed and replaced. The process of weeding out the subpar performers is conducted by the user clients in collaboration with the temp agencies. User clients cast a careful eye on the performance of the temp workers during the first few weeks, and they notify the agents if they want a replacement. When their source of living is on the line given this high level of job insecurity, these temp workers work hard to survive the first cut.

I observed the ways my fellow temp workers engaged work once they survived the first cut. The most intriguing aspect of my participant observation was that they worked extremely hard. I was surprised and held a deep sense of respect in looking at the
way they exerted effort far beyond what was necessary for them to keep the job. They involved their psyches in finding ways to work faster and mindfully aiming for high quality output. I came to question why they worked so hard when the management offered little in return. I interviewed twenty-five factory temp workers to hear their experiences on the job from entry to exit. Diligence and commitment was a common theme, a primary pattern emerging from these interviews.

I demonstrated that there is a subtle process behind the temp workers’ participation. Because the job was so insecure, workers initially worked hard to acquire the necessary skills to survive on the job. They became proficient factory workers as a result, and once they learned the practical skills necessary for factory work, they came to be absorbed in investing their mind and body in doing a good job. They came to experience joy in doing quality work, because they saw themselves reflected in the good job they did. They enjoyed seeing the difference they were able to make in their immediate world through their hard work. Commitment and investment of the self in the work was about making standardized routine-work something personal and intimate. Hard work made the job good. Once workers became fully proficient in exercising their skills, work became a seductive force that pulled in the workers to do even better and work harder; in this sense, hard work had intrinsic value for the worker.

While previous studies on temporary agency workers have acknowledged similar patterns of hard work and commitment, they have explained such daily behaviors either as a consequence of being coerced to do so for survival, or as a utilitarian, interest-seeking behavior of rationally securing economic and cultural rewards. I have borrowed Bourdieu’s concepts of practical sense, bodily capital, and illusio to offer an alternative
explanation to the question of why temp workers work so hard when management offers so little in return.

Yet despite their commitment, temp workers were not wholehearted believers in the game of hard work. What followed the process of becoming a competent worker and developing passion in doing quality work were moments of self-reflection, questioning and doubting their commitment. They paused, looked at themselves from the outside in, and reflected on their devoted performance. What triggered self-reflection were the instances of unequal treatment they continued to receive as “secondary citizens” on the shop floor, which now stood in stark contrast to the commitment they had come to bear. Being relegated to the status of a replaceable, peripheral worker despite their passion to work hard damaged their sense of self-worth and blunted their enthusiasm. Abrupt dismissals were also another instance that led temp workers to question their commitment. It was these discriminatory treatments that caused painful ambivalence between experiencing joy from passionate involvement in work on the one hand and suffering from discriminatory treatment on the other.

In addition to analyzing this individual form of worker agency, I examined how temp workers are responding to this neoliberal employment regime at the group or organizational level. To study the collective forms of workers’ responses, I conducted participant observation research by joining a labor union in Tokyo that organized nonstandard workers. I also conducted interviews with labor union activists and temp workers who have decided to initiate labor struggles. Individual membership-based alternative labor unions have become the primary organizations acting to bring about positive changes to the working conditions of the temp workers. Because these unions
exist outside of corporations and reside in geographic communities, these structural characteristics allowed them to respond to the grievances of nonstandard workers in contrast to the enterprise unions that statutorily exclude them from union protection. Japanese labor laws oblige employers to deal in good faith with unions that represent even a single employee. These legal structures enable unions to wage struggles against large corporations without organizing the majority. I called this particular shape of collective response “advocacy without constituency,” a characteristic pattern of labor movements on nonstandard worker issues in contemporary Japan. This mode of waging struggles against corporations on nonstandard worker issues is held in contrast to the way labor unions in the United States spend their resources on organizing as many contingent workers as possible within the workplace.

While legal arrangements in Japan enable a handful of temp workers to embark on a battle against a large corporation, such advantage is directly linked to the weakness of the movements, which is their lack of representativeness. These movements have great difficulty creating visibility and societal recognition. Only a handful of workers taking a stand relegate the battle to a movement by the minority, as if it is a personal problem of limited scope rather than a deep social issue. In order to empower themselves against such weak structural leverage, alternative unions use networks with other unions and civil society organizations to form ad hoc action committees in order to create large scale social movements. Alternative unions also use performative street demonstration tactics to capture the attention of media and gain visibility. Usage of costumes, decorative headgear, and creative performances are alternative forms of street politics, in contrast to
the traditional, old-school ways of protest that involved wearing headbands and pumping fists while yelling out slogans in unison.

**Theoretical Contributions**

Some theoretical advances to existing studies on temp workers were made in this dissertation. First, using the concepts of *practical sense* and *illusio*, this study has introduced the mediating mechanism through which coercion and consent operate. The outlined mechanism parallels the “game of making out” that Burawoy’s workers played (Burawoy 1979). In the historical context of 1970s America, focusing on workers who enjoyed union protection and were paid by the piece rate, he offered a processual account, or a mechanism that explained how workers translated the deprivations inherent in factory work and the available reward structure into a game which led them to become absorbed in producing above quota. In addition, playing the game well helped secure an honorable place on the shop floor. This study attempted to identify an explanatory mechanism for how temp workers came to be devoted workers without the remuneration that was available for workers in the 1970s in the U.S. In other words, this study extends the work of Burawoy by examining how consent operated in the context of temporary workers, who exert themselves even in the absence of the material incentives and job security that Burawoy’s workers enjoyed.

Existing explanations mostly based on temp workers in the U.S. have argued that temp workers work hard either because they have no choice, or in rational pursuit of their own interest. The theoretical concept of consent was used to identify either the coercive structures or the economic and cultural rewards available to them. This study went
beyond the available coercion/consent debate by offering a *processual* account that was central to the idea of consent as it was originally introduced. I have shown that threats and incentives do exist in its particular ways for the temp workers, as identified by previous research. However, there are subtle in-between processes that translate them into concrete human practices. Since temp workers do not just follow coercive demands or only seek to maximize utility, there has to be *something* in-between threats/incentives and subsequent action. This dissertation focused on the workers’ actual experience of work and identified that “something” by using concepts from Bourdieu and others.

In doing so, this study elaborated on the concepts of practical sense and *illusio* by bringing them into the world of work. *Illusio* is specifically generated among the factory workers, because as many scholars from Marx to contemporary researchers such as Rose (2004) and Crawford (2009) have argued, manual labor has its own rewarding properties. Humans experience joy in the physical use of the body to make a difference in the world. We see ourselves reflected and implicated in the job we do. We appreciate our human potential through this dialectical relationship between effort and outcome. It is this particular nature of joy arising from moving one’s hand and body that makes manual work seductive and enjoyable, leading the workers to invest themselves deeper into perfecting the job. By investing the self into the job, workers carve out an autonomous world in which they are able to practice their ability to the maximum and create something that is a reflection of who they are and what they can do in this world. This particular nature of *illusio* (passion) is nurtured in the factory temp workers without the rewards only available to the regular, permanent workers.
This study also identified the theoretical limits of the concept *illusio*. I have demonstrated that the temp workers came to experience joy in doing quality work during the process of working hard initially to learn the skills required in factory work for survival and then eventually becoming proficient at it. However, these temp workers did not become un-alienated workers happily devoting themselves to work. They did not remain fully committed, but rather questioned and doubted their commitments. Workers in fact suffered from the awareness that they have become good workers producing quality goods, but continued to receive discriminatory treatment despite their devotion and expertise. The concept of *illusio* is limited when it comes to theorizing the workers’ capacity to self-reflect. The idea of being absorbed and consumed in play does not mesh well with the idea of pausing for moments of thought and critiquing the system from the outside-in. This study illuminated the existing theoretical tension between *illusio* and reflection.

The dissertation also extended the theoretical and practical use of the idea of social movement unionism. By analyzing the collective forms of worker agency, I have demonstrated the particular ways in which the idea of social movements unionism is interpreted, valued and practiced by alternative unions in Japan. In the United States, labor unions have historically adopted the idea to organize workers in the service industry, who tended to be immigrants, to form unions to improve their working conditions. Social movement unionism generally involved active participation by the rank and file members of the union, effort placed on community organizing, active collaboration and partnership with the local non-profits, and adoption of non-institutionalized tactics. By analyzing how alternative unions in Japan have responded to the abrupt dismissal cases of factory
temps in Japan, I have argued that far less effort is exerted in organizing the nonstandard workers while more emphasis is placed on engaging in public demonstrations, lobbying, and court struggles to change labor laws. The way social movement unionism is practiced in Japan involves the incorporation of a handful of contingent workers (in this case factory temp workers) and using their specific cases to bring about larger social change. In doing so, Japanese unions network with other unions and civil society groups as well as engaging in performative public protests to draw media attention. I explained that the difference lies in the ways labor laws are structured in Japan that enables unions to embark on social movements by unionizing only a fraction of the aggrieved population. This study showed that there is a variety of social movement unionism with different meanings and usage. While the idea travels, the way it is adopted and practiced depends on the local context and history.

I have also used the concept of network brokerage from the social movement literature to show how alternative unions build bridges with other unions and non-profit organizations to overcome their structural weaknesses of small size and financial weakness to challenge large corporations. This study highlighted how the concept is useful in analyzing not only what these unions do tactically but the roles they serve in a society like Japan that is segmented in many significant ways. The earlier chapters have shown the nature of the sharp divide that exists between regular, permanent workers and the nonstandard workers. This sharp gap is reflected in the way labor unions are segmented. On the one hand, there are workplace unions (enterprise unions) that protect the regular workers. These unions not only exclude the nonstandard workers, but basically consent to sacrificing the nonstandard workers in the same offices and factories.
to protect the regular workers’ jobs. This spirit and practice is called enterprise unionism, which “social movement unionism” in Japan specifically aims to overcome. On the other side of the fissure are the alternative unions (community unions and general unions) that welcome nonstandard workers and specifically aim to improve their working conditions. The concept “network brokerage” is able to shed light on this divide that exists within labor, which is exactly what is “brokered” by the alternative unions. They attempt to involve the enterprise unions that they exclude and do not represent. The utility of the concept is illuminated also when considering the fact that fissures exist among the alternative unions as well, especially between the old left and the new left. This study advanced the theoretical utility of the concept by showing how network brokerage works in the context of the vertical and lateral divisions that exist in the Japanese left.

**Potential Directions in Research**

These theoretical advances point to several avenues for further research. One possible direction of research is to see how the concepts of practical sense and illusio can be applied to explain worker agency in other forms of precarious work. This study’s data were limited to the case of factory temp workers in Japan. As we know, nonstandard workers who deserve more academic attention are not limited to factory temps. In fact, similar patterns of participation can be observed among many other workers who work under difficult situations. Housemaids from Harlem in Dill (1988)’s study framed their job as “an art,” exhorting themselves to “make their jobs rewarding” (p. 37). Sharone (2007)’s full-time job seekers were “absorbed” in the game of job searching, inwardly consumed by the maneuvers and strategies to construct a marketable self despite
unemployment being a structural issue. Stacey (2005) gives examples of home care workers who despite the low pay industriously involve their psyche in perfecting the job of bath-giving. Crowley et al. (2010), while demonstrating the emergence of neo-Taylorist intensification of scientific management that ushers the professional and managerial workers to “kill themselves” at work, nonetheless acknowledge the “inward drives” (p. 442) these workers experience. On a related point, this study remains agnostic on whether a similar mechanism applies to regular workers. It remains to be tested in future research whether the concepts of practical sense and illusio help to explain the lived experiences of regular workers, which would necessarily require taking into account the particular nature of their employment relations and labor control. The mechanisms outlined in this dissertation may be applied, modified, and improved using cases from these different types of workers.

Another direction of research is a systematic comparative institutional analysis of the different ways in which temporary agency work is structured and practiced in industrialized capitalist countries and the differential impacts they have on the well-being of temp workers. In Chapter 2, I have shown the different ways in which temporary agency work is regulated in Japan and the E.U. countries, and the negative consequences the difference has on the employment conditions of temp workers in Japan. I traced the historical developments and the structural conditions that made temp work more disadvantaging in Japan than in other countries. This finding suggests that a systematic comparison of the varieties of temp work systems adopted in advanced industrialized countries, their courses of development, and the ramifications they have on the workers is
necessary. Such comparative institutional analysis may lead to important policy initiatives that will help design and implement better employment systems.

Finally, this study extended Burawoy’s idea of consent by bringing in Bourdieu and used his concepts to examine the case of temp workers, which then led to identifying the limitation inherent in the concept of illusio. This theoretical development calls for future studies that extend the concept by theoretically examining the conditions and processes of “exiting” the illusio. Such studies would help analyze how workers can transition from bearing genuine interest in doing quality work to critically reflecting on their commitment, and even to engaging in private or collective forms of resistances. As I have shown, temp workers in reality made the transition. Even though the proportion was small among those who lost their jobs during the 2008 financial recession, some in fact did wage labor struggles after suffering from the ambivalence of bearing the illusio and being disillusioned by it. Workers have the capacity to critique, but how that happens, and under what conditions it leads to collective forms of resistance requires further analyses.

I believe this study has answered the “first fact” to be established, as Marx has noted in The German Ideology, which is the physical organizations in which people are producing their means of subsistence in relation to nature and with other members of society. In the historical development of globalization and neoliberalism, the state has legally endorsed the need of businesses to retain a flexible workforce. Temp workers living their daily lives within the system are atomized workers, struggling daily to make their jobs good for themselves. On the other hand, alternative unions are waging struggles against large corporations by creating coalitions and using performative tactics. This
research has allowed us to know that much. However, we need to move beyond establishing the first fact towards the direction of a phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg 2001), evaluating the direction in which we are heading, and moreover, what should be done about it. Sen (1999) states that “income and wealth…are admirable general-purpose means for having more freedom to lead the kind of life we have reason to value (14).” When the quality of working life is increasingly deteriorating for many in industrialized countries, it means more people are losing their freedom to live a life they value. It is important to know not only how workers are responding to the emergent challenges, but also how to design employment policies that enable people to shape their lives in ways they find meaningful.
## APPENDIX

### SUMMARY TABLE OF FACTORY TEMP INTERVIEWEES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Workplace</th>
<th>Temp Yrs.</th>
<th>Means of Access</th>
<th>Time of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adachi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>early</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Coworker</td>
<td>Aug. 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashida</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>early</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>Union affiliation</td>
<td>Dec. ’10, May ‘11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>early</td>
<td>Grad School</td>
<td>Heavy industry</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Snowballing</td>
<td>Dec. 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enomoto</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>early</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Sept. 2008 Jan.’09, Dec. ’10</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higa</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Coworker</td>
<td>Sept. 2008</td>
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Tsukada, Tsutomu. 2005. *Dakara San’ya wa yamerarenē: Boku ga hiyatoi rōdōsha datta 180 nichi* [San’ya is hard to leave: My 180 days as a day laborer]. Tokyo: Gentōsha.


