

Working harder to end death by overwork

① “When you’re in the office 20 hours a day, you don’t understand what life you’re living for anymore. (It’s so *pathetic*) you come to laugh.” – Twitter post by Matsuri Takahashi, as reported in the Mainichi Shimbun. A week after the above message, Matsuri Takahashi, a 24-year-old first-year worker at Japan’s largest advertising firm, Dentsu, committed suicide on Dec. 25, 2015, by jumping from a corporate dormitory. Takahashi’s mother, suspecting that labor conditions played a role in her daughter’s suicide, lodged a formal complaint with a labor standards inspection office in Tokyo’s Minato Ward. pathetic:痛ましい

② In October, the office recognized that the suicide was related to death by overwork (*karōshi*). The office recognized that Takahashi had worked more than 100 hours of overtime in the month before her death. Takahashi’s suicide recalled a similar incident at Dentsu in 1991, when a 24-year-old employee killed himself, with his suicide also recognized as having resulted from overwork. Dentsu fought the initial ruling until ultimately losing a Supreme Court battle in 2000. The advertising giant vowed that such circumstances would never happen again, promising that it “takes the life and death of its employees seriously.”

③ Dentsu repeated the same assurances after inspectors raided three of its offices last month. In addition, labor standards inspectors earlier this year ruled the 2013 death of a 30-year-old male Dentsu employee from illness as a result of overwork.

④ In the past month, labor standards inspection offices ruled that two other deaths in Japan were also the result of overwork. One was an intern from the Philippines who died of a heart attack in 2014 after close to 120 hours of overtime in a month. The other was a Kansai Electric Co. employee who had spent more than 100 hours of overtime in a month preparing for an inspection of the firm’s nuclear facilities.

⑤ The government published its first white paper on death from overwork this year, noting that labor accident insurance was paid out in 96 cases where workers died of heart or brain failure, and in 93 cases of suicide or attempted suicide caused by mental health issues in fiscal 2015. While compensation payments in cases where death was caused by heart or brain failure have declined slightly since 2002, payments related to deaths caused by mental health issues have increased.

⑥ People naturally ask, “If working conditions are that bad, why don’t people just quit instead of killing themselves?” If, like myself, you have ever worked a 120-hour week for a Japanese company, you can perhaps understand their frame of mind.

⑦ “An abusive boss can exacerbate the problem, but suicide from overwork usually happens when the victim is suffering from extreme sleep deprivation,” says Ichiyo Matsuzaki, an expert on workplace stress at Tsukuba University. “Cerebral fatigue occurs, causing the capacity for decision-making to diminish, and a small incident can lead them to believe that they have no other choice but to die. They aren’t able to see any other option because they can’t.” exacerbate:悪化させる sleep deprivation:睡眠不足

⑧ It’s worth noting that death from overwork isn’t the actual root of the problem; it’s simply an extreme symptom of a society where corporations known as *burakku kigyō* (so-called black, or dark, enterprises) are operating with relative impunity. The Japan Trade Federation Union suggests that 1 in 4 workers may be employed at such companies. impunity:刑罰を免れること

⑨ Fatigue isn’t the only reason exhausted workers don’t quit, says Haruki Konno, author of “Dark Corporation,” a seminal book on corporate malfesance in Japan. malfesance:違法行為

⑩ “In Japanese society, new graduates must work at least three years in their first company to qualify as having enough of a ‘career’ to change jobs,” he says. “So if you quit sooner than that, you are ‘damaged goods’ on the job market.” Konno highlights another problem. “There are no predetermined agreements on workload,” he says, “so it is impossible for employees to defy orders that come their way.”

⑪ Konno suggests three simple measures that could be introduced to help fix the problem.

“Place a cap on labor hours, enforce penalties when violations occur and increase the number of labor standard inspectors to execute this,” he says. “What’s more, penalize companies for failing to produce work records or for submitting fake data.”

⑫ They are all excellent suggestions. However, here’s another: punish companies that work their employees to death.

⑬ Why aren’t people getting married or having children? I’d suggest that it’s because young people are working all the time — unfortunately, that appears to be life for many in Japan.

In a tweet posted in November last year, Takahashi herself expresses this sentiment: “Are we working to live or living to work? That’s life.” By now, we should know better. It’s important for Japan to adopt a work-life balance that isn’t tilted toward a tragic end. 【Dec 3, 2016 / Special To The Japan Times by Jake Adelstein】

★Ice breaker for active discussion

1. Have you experienced working overtime? If not, can you imagine yourself working 100 hours of overtime?
2. What possible measures could have been taken to prevent this tragedy from happening?
3. What lessons should companies learn from these kinds of incidents?
4. How can we make a good work and life balance?
5. Make sentences using the following words: pathetic, deprivation, impunity, abusive, penalize and raid.