

Editorial: Close loopholes in restrictions on overtime amid work reforms (loophole 抜け穴)

- 1) The government has drawn up an action plan for work style reforms. The core of the proposal consists of measures to restrict long work hours and guarantee equal pay for equal work with the aim of improving wages for non-regular workers.
- 2) The move represents a major shift in the labor policy Japan has taken since the 1990s, which has relaxed restrictions on working conditions to prioritize corporate activities
- 3) The plan says the government aims to "eliminate the phrase, 'non-regular workers,'" and "transform Japanese society into one in which the traditional idea of respecting workaholic employees is dismissed." The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe embarked on what it calls "work-style reforms" as part of its economic growth strategy. But it turns out that the Abe administration has brought forth the policy of protecting workers, and it should be appreciated.
- 4) Still, the planned restrictions on overtime are lax. The upper limit on work hours during busy periods, on which particular attention has been focused, would be set at less than 100 hours per month not to exceed the 100-hour-per-month overtime standards, which are used to recognize notorious "deaths by overwork" as work-related accidents. This is despite the fact that over half of 96 people, whose deaths from brain or heart ailments were recognized as work-related accidents in fiscal 2015, had worked for 80 to 100 hours per month shortly before their deaths. (lax ゆるい、怠慢な、手ぬるい)
- 5) The plan also calls for early enactment of a bill to revise the Labor Standards Act to establish a system under which highly specialized professionals, who earn a certain level of income, would be exempted from legal restrictions on work hours and days off with some conditions attached. However, the introduction of such a merit-based pay system could force those subject to the system to work long hours without overtime pay, running counter to the ongoing efforts to limit overtime work.
- 6) The biggest challenge is to ensure the efficacy of the legal restrictions on work hours. Under the plan, employers who violate the regulations on work hours would be subject to punishments, but the plan stops short of describing the details of punitive measures. Overtime allowances were originally introduced as a kind of "fine" for employers that force employees to work long hours, but are now an important part of income for workers to cover their living expenses. (efficacy 有効性 punitive measures 罰則措置)
- 7) The plan also urges companies to incorporate a clause in their labor-management agreement stating that wages for workers dispatched from temp agencies should be at least equal to those for full-time employees. However, it remains unclear how companies can abide by this since there are many businesses where workers have not formed labor unions. (abide by 規則などを忠実に守る)
- 8) To ensure the efficacy of the government plan, oversight systems need to be reinforced, including boosting the number of officials at local labor standards inspection offices, which are authorized to conduct compulsory inspections on companies suspected of violating labor laws. (oversight 監視、監督、取り締まり)
- 9) Against the backdrop of a labor shortage, improvements in working conditions, such as cutting business hours and employees' work hours, were high on the agenda of labor-management negotiations this spring.
- 10) In order to bolster these trends, the government should work out a system to close loopholes in restrictions on work hours in amending labor related laws. 【Mainichi Japan | 2017-03-30】

★Ice breaker for active discussion

1. What are some labor-related problems the Japanese society is facing today?
2. What is your impression of the action plan drawn up by the government?
3. Have you ever experienced excessive overtime work? If not, do you know someone who has?
4. How can we strike a balance between work hours and personal time?
5. Make sentences using the following vocabularies: loophole, strategy, efficacy, abide by, dispatch, lax.