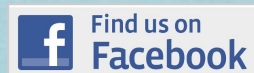


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TOM TOM ENGLISH



Modern-day slavery?

VOCABULARY

Slave-driver =

A person who makes
others work very hard

Comprehensible

=

Understandable

To date =

Up to now

Vein =

Literally a geological
term meaning a
lengthy occurrence of a
particular kind of
mineral or metal. In
this case, means in the
same category.

Discussion questions

1. Do you think the economy is improving?
Why? Why not?
2. Do you think the number of black
companies is increasing?
3. What do you think about "Service
Overtime" in minimum wage jobs?
4. Do you/did you do "service overtime" in
your job? How much? What did you think
about that?
5. Have you ever done this kind of job? Do
you think that company was a black
company?
6. Do you think the government should do
anything about this problem?

VOCABULARY

How the other half lives =

Expression used for
talking about people in a
different group in
society to ours

Berate =

Criticise angrily

Exasperated =

Intensely irritated,
infuriated

Handy =

Convenient, close to
hand

Nothing doing =

No way, no possibility

In another age they might have been called **slave-drivers**. Today the operative term is “black kigyo”, black because of the way they work their staff – to death in the very worst cases, or, more commonly, to frustrated exhaustion and beyond. “Karoshi,” death from overwork, is readily **comprehensible** even among non-Japanese speakers as a distinctive phenomenon in the developed world.

The economy is said to be improving. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe just won a crushing electoral victory on the strength of the real or supposed successes **to date** of economic reform measures dubbed “Abenomics.” In a skeptical **vein**, Josei Seven assigned a reporter to get hired by a “black kigyo” and see **how the other half lives**.

The reporter, a woman in her 30s, quickly lands a job with “a leading chain restaurant” specializing in inexpensive gyudon. It’s part-time work, 1,120 yen an hour plus transportation. Nearly 40% of Japan’s wage-earners now work on a part-time basis, with few benefits or bonuses and little protection against instant dismissal.

The undercover reporter undergoes three days of training, four hours a day, mostly lectures and study of the company manual, no hands-on experience. It’s not much preparation for what lies ahead. (Some fellow trainees quit immediately on overhearing a customer **berate** a new waitress for making a beginner’s mistake.)

Her hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a one-hour break. The noon rush turns the place into “a war zone” – orders shouted, plates clattering, staff rushing madly about, too busy to guide the novice, who must tough it out on her own. She’s responsible for 10 seats at the counter; one leaves, another comes;

there’s no time to catch your breath, no time for a toilet break. Well, fine, a restaurant is busy at lunch hour, once it’s over, things will calm down a bit – right? Wrong, for then there’s cleaning up to do, and preparations to make for the next rush.

“Not finished that yet?” her **exasperated** supervisor shout at her.

“I only have one body!” she retorts.

The shift ends. Home at last? Not at all. There’s still a daily report to write (number of hours, number of customers); then at the last minute a customer wanders in who must be served by whoever’s **handy**, which happens to be her. This is known in “black kigyo” circles as “service overtime” - meaning unpaid.

She stuck it out three days and quit on the fourth, surprised at how little surprised her manager was by her hasty departure. “He must be used to it”.

“Black” working conditions are by no means confined to the food industry, Josei Seven finds. The magazine speaks to a 25-year-old clothing boutique employee. She works part-time for now, having been promised full-time status later. On the surface, the working conditions seem fine – she even gets to draw up her own work schedule. The trouble is, the manager pays no attention to the schedule she submits and simply assigns her to meet his needs. Soon she was working longer and longer shifts with only two or three days off a month, serving customers by day, cleaning up after closing. Again, the overtime is “service.” At one point she came down with a fever and asked for a day off. **Nothing doing!**

She’s still there, still waiting for full-time status, but confesses, “I’ve just about reaching my limit.”