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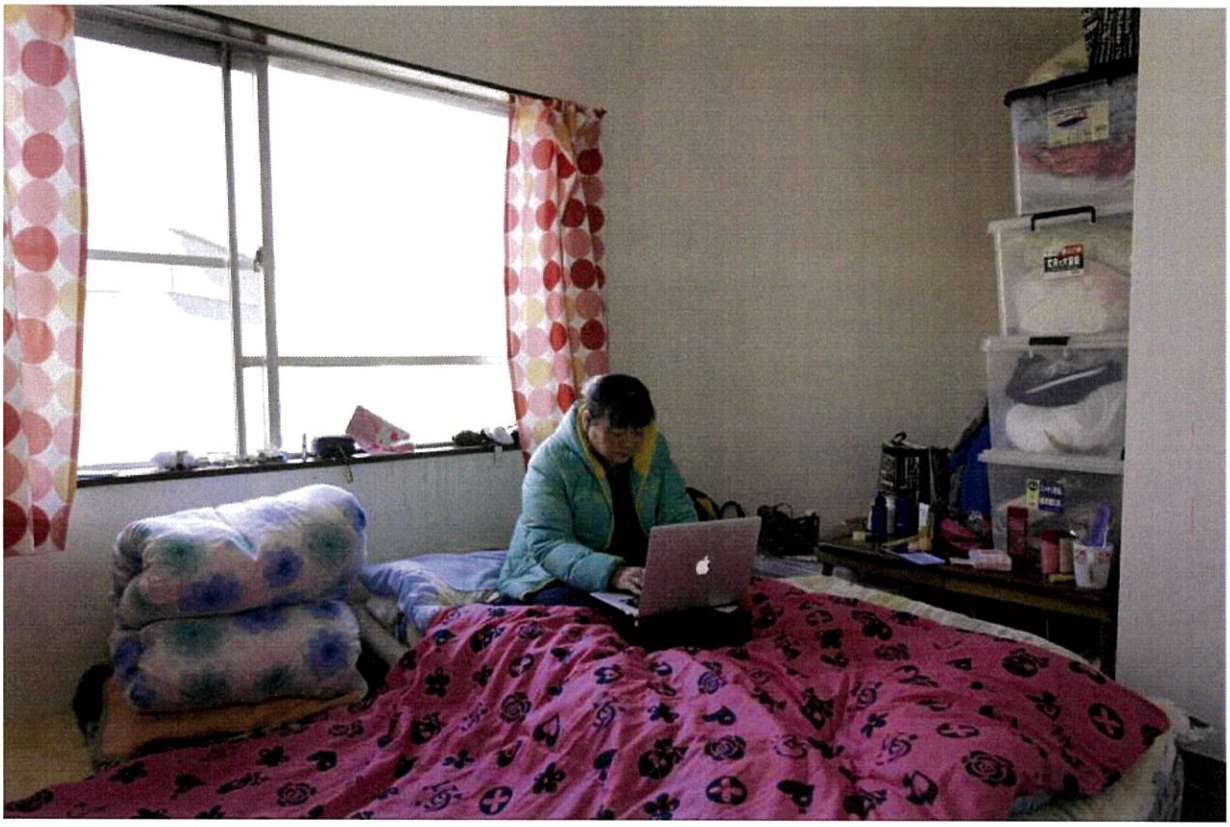

Chinese trainee Tang Xili uses a laptop computer in her room at a shelter managed by a local labor union in Hashima, Gifu Prefecture, in January last year. Japan has been heavily criticized for exploiting foreign trainees as cheap labor. | BLOOMBERG

NATIONAL / SOCIAL ISSUES

In a break from LDP, Kono calls for Japan to open doors to blue-collar foreign workers

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Veteran Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Taro Kono is calling for a drastic policy shift that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is loath to accept: open up Japan to blue-collar foreign workers.

For Japan, which has for years grappled with a fertility rate of less than 1.5, the only way to survive as a viable economy is to accept immigrants, Kono said at a Tokyo symposium on immigration policy last week.

"Even if some miracle happens and Japan's fertility rate shoots up to 2.0 tomorrow, it takes these babies about 20 years to contribute to our country's workforce. It's obvious to everybody's eyes that the only option we have is to accept workers from overseas," he said.

The event, co-organized by Tokyo-based think tank Japan Center for International Exchange and German political foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Japan, covered the different ways that Japan and Germany deal with immigration and refugee issues.

Kono's calls for Japan's transformation into a pro-immigration country are in stark contrast with Abe's stance to welcome skilled, young foreign talent with open arms, while remaining opposed — at least officially — to an influx of blue-collar workers.

A 2016 growth strategy unveiled by the Abe government rolled out a number of visa perks for high-level white-collar workers and international students, only with a caveat: these measures, the document said, "must not be mistaken for an immigration policy."

Behind the government's stance, critics say, are deeply ingrained fears among the public that letting in foreign workers would breed crime and steal jobs from Japanese.

Xenophobia runs particularly deep in a network of people called *netouyo* (internet-based right-wingers), Kono said, adding that they are mistakenly convinced "their life will be endangered by the inflow of foreigners."

Such irrational fears of foreign residents, he said, also permeate the ranks of the LDP who "still think Japan is inhabited only by those who are purely Japanese and instinctively balk at the prospect of heterogeneous elements making their way into their country."

As such, few politicians in the ruling party dare to acknowledge the need for a more open immigration policy as candidly as he does — let alone publicly espouse it.

Kono, who served as head of the National Public Safety Commission from October 2015 until August last year, pointed out that Japan, despite its official denials, in fact does allow in unskilled foreign workers, namely through a state-sponsored foreign trainee program and special visa framework extended to Brazilians and Peruvians of Japanese ancestry.

"Japan needs to abolish these systems and issue a work permit" for unskilled laborers, Kono said, citing a basic Japanese language ability as a possible prerequisite.

To pave the way for a longer term and, eventually, permanent stay, the visa should be renewable, provided that its holders steer clear of criminal activity and show improvement in their Japanese proficiency after a certain period, he said.

"Of course, foreign workers shouldn't be discriminated against in terms of pay standards compared with their Japanese counterparts. The government must take responsibility for supporting the education of their children, too," Kono argued.

With half-Japanese children currently obliged to choose one of their nationalities over the other before the age of 22, Kono insisted the government put an end to this "stupidity" and legalize dual citizenship, too.

Kono's view is not yet a mainstream one among Japanese politicians. But in the symposium, he found a reliable ally in Masaharu Nakagawa, a veteran lawmaker from the main opposition force, the Democratic Party.

The DP lawmaker stressed the need to enact a comprehensive law legalizing the migration of unskilled workers, while blasting the government's current "opportunistic" approach to attracting such individuals.

Nakagawa, however, has learned the hard way how staunch the public aversion to immigration is.

In 2012, when Nakagawa, then a state minister tasked with promoting diversity in society, expressed his eagerness to craft a law to promote immigration, he faced an immediate massive public backlash.

A day after he brought up the idea at a news conference, "my office was met with a deluge of angry calls and a pile of faxes protesting the move, with my ministry similarly swamped with calls to such an extent that our job was temporarily paralyzed," he recalled.

But he remains undeterred.

Today, Nakagawa is a leading member of a nonpartisan group of lawmakers aiming to give foreign residents easier access to Japanese language education, in what he hopes will become a first step toward a "more systematic" effort to help them integrate into society.

"The fact of the matter is that foreign workers are a huge part of our society now. We need to create a law that spells out how to accept them," he said.