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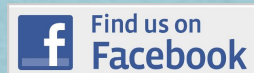
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TOM TOM ENGLISH



Hard work - no reward

VOCABULARY

**Something is
afoot =**

Something unknown is
currently in progress

Get ahead =

To advance, move
forward, in a job,
school or life in general

Impenetrable =

Cannot be penetrated,
pierced, broken
through or entered

Mired =

Trapped in a difficult
situation

Read the article overleaf and discuss these questions:

1. Are you satisfied with your current salary/income? (You don't need to tell us how much you earn, just whether you are satisfied!) Why? Why not?
2. Do you think it's true that for most middle-aged underpaid workers, getting ahead is impossible? Why? Why not?
3. What do you think about Iwasaki-san's feeling that marriage requires a firm economic base? Do you agree? If so, how firm should the base be? If not, why not?
4. Do you think Abenomics has been successful? If not, do you think it can be successful in future?
5. What do you think about Imoto-san's company? Do you think this is a common problem in Japan? Can anything be done about it?

VOCABULARY

Take its toll =

To have a bad effect on
someone or something,
usually over a long
period of time

Ruefully =

Causing sorrow or pity,
mournful, doleful

Incapacitated =

Deprived of strength
and power, debilitated

Institutionalization

=

To send someone who is
not able to live
independently to live in
assisted
accommodation.

When 96% of respondents answer “No,” to a poll, **something is afoot**. Spa! (Dec 6) surveyed 100 company employees aged 35-49 earning under 4 million yen a year. The question that drew the overwhelming negative response is, “Are you satisfied with your current salary?”

Dissatisfaction is not necessarily a bad thing. It can fuel ambition, stimulate the drive to get ahead. But Spa!’s point is that for the vast majority among the growing ranks of underpaid middle-aged workers, the state of the economy is such that **getting ahead** is impossible. Hard work yields no rewards; the 4-million-yen barrier is **impenetrable**; you’re **mired** in poverty, comparatively speaking, “until death.”

Labor ministry statistics show an average annual salary for employees in their early 40s of 5.75m yen. “Iwasaki-san”, 47, single and earning 3.6m a year, may not be poor in absolute terms, but he works for a struggling company, hasn’t had a raise in 10 years, has no hope of a raise, and perhaps can’t be blamed if he feels poor.

His company, a metals processor, is too small to cope with the soaring cost of imported raw materials – a by-product of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Consequent cost-shaving focuses on salaries, which stagnate, and overtime pay, which has vanished. Iwasaki used to earn 3.6m a year working overtime. He says now he can save nothing and has given up on marriage. Marriage, he feels, requires a firmer economic base than he can possibly build. Iwasaki is fairly representative of workers in small and midsize companies, says personnel consultant Shigeyuki Jo. “The domestic market is shrinking. The firms that are doing well are the leading global exporters” – this 4 years after the

government’s “Abenomics” reform package began, with the intention of igniting a more general upsurge. METI figures show sales for small and midsize companies down by 30 trillion yen between 2011 and 2015. Those same smaller companies reduced their payroll costs by 1.6 trillion yen and people like Iwasaki are feeling the pinch.

Some feel it much worse. “Mr Imoto,” at 41, escaped one “black company” only to land in another, and then another. A black company is one that exploits its employees. Long hours, low pay. Even so, Iwamoto, a software engineer, had worked his way up to peak earnings of 4.5m, but the endless workdays – he’d spend a month at a time sleeping on cardboard spread out on his office floor – **took their toll**. His health broke down, he left and found a less demanding job, but his salary plunged to 3.3m. He has three children. The family lives in a small house, the kids sleep in one room. That will do for now, while they’re small, but when they’re bigger? “We parents will have to sleep in the kitchen,” says Imoto **ruefully**.

“Mr Takahashi,” whose father at 73 suffered a stroke that left him half paralyzed and one of 6.2 million people who cannot live without constant assistance. Takahashi, 41 and single, is an only child. His father was not quite **incapacitated** enough to qualify for subsidized **institutionalization**, so the son quit his job and found another close to his father’s house. Takahashi now earns 3.3m a year, 2.5m less than before. His new boss is allows Takahashi as flexible a schedule as possible – but the boss’s retirement is approaching and the boss’s son is known to resent the drain on efficiency. Takahashi sees the axe raised over his head. He doesn’t know what he’ll do when it falls.