

Indonesian “Trainees” in Japan: Life Strategies of Cheap Migrant Laborers Abroad

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Abstract

After signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a Japan Foundation, IMM-Japan (Association for International Manpower Development of Medium and Small Enterprises, Japan) in December 1992, the Department of Manpower and Transmigration of the Republic of Indonesia began to send Indonesian youths to take the trainee program in Japan. Since then, the government has dispatched Indonesian youths approximately 2,000-3,000 every year for training in various job sectors in across Japan for the period of three years each time.

Even though the MOU stated that this training is for the participant to be a trainee, in practice they work as cheap migrant laborers in Japan. The concept of “trainee” is used by the Japanese companies to “invite” young migrant laborers, especially from China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand. Japanese law officially prohibits migrants to come to Japan to work, so the training program is a way for a company to access cheap migrant laborers without breaking the law.

Even though migrants come to Japan as “trainees” work as “menial laborers” who are exploited by many small and medium-size Japanese companies. Migrant workers receive lower monthly wages than the equivalent Japanese employees. As cheap laborers, Indonesian migrants create a number of life strategies in order to be able to survive during their training’s program, earn skills and save money as much as possible. They create a number of strategies not just in order to survive in Japan and but also to prepare their future life.

This article explores trainee’s program held by the Department of Manpower by examining their work motivation, problems they face, and gender aspects in male migrant laborers life during living in Japan. Data were collected between August 2005 and September 2006 using in-depth interview, observation, and small-scale survey.