

# Japan's Democrats merge to launch new, right-wing opposition party

By Ben McGrath  
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Japan's two main opposition parties, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP), merged into a new grouping on September 15. The new party, which also includes some former so-called independents, totals 150 members of the National Diet, far short of the 454 seats controlled by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner Komeito.

The party voted to retain the name CDP and elected Yukio Edano, head of the old CDP, as its leader on September 10. At a September 15 event to mark the new party's launch, Edano offered vague pledges of mild social reforms while claiming his party now "serves as a launch pad for a change of power." He criticized the LDP for the various scandals that occurred under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

"The [Yoshihide] Suga administration is about to be launched. If it attempts to escape from discussing controversies in the parliament by selfishly dissolving the Diet and calling a general election, it is proof that it is engaging in politics with the people in an attempt to maintain power," Edano stated. He claimed that his new party would take the LDP to task in parliament for the past scandals.

Conspicuously absent from Edano's speech was any reference to the real situation facing Japan's working class and youth as well as the issue of Japanese remilitarization and constitutional revision.

Japan's official unemployment rate stands at just 2.9 percent, but it hides the reality facing millions. In the April-June quarter, Japan's GDP fell 7.8 percent over the previous quarter, according to data released in August. It is the third consecutive quarter recording economic decline and the worst economic situation for Japan since 1955, according to the BBC.

Government figures show that more than 50,000 workers have lost their jobs since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but this is likely an undercounting. In addition, 38 percent of the total Japanese workforce is in low-paid, part-time jobs, where workers lack protections and are at risk of being fired, especially as the economic situation deteriorates following the economy's fall into recession as a result of the pandemic.

Another 2.4 million furloughed workers face the prospect of being fired as companies look to cut costs. At the moment, these workers have been kept on the payrolls through subsidies from Tokyo, in an attempt to avoid a social explosion. However, these funds are paid to the employers, who use them to cover only two-thirds of workers' wages.

Voices are calling for an end to this program however. Taro Saito, who leads the Economic Research Department at the NLI Research Institute in Tokyo, stated that the subsidy program "is only delaying the deterioration (of the employment situation) and shouldn't be kept in place for a long time."

By launching the new party now, the Democrats are hoping to forestall an explosion of social anger. The new CDP leadership is consciously aware that the LDP has managed to stay in power for nearly eight years, despite scandals and mass unpopularity, due to the Democrats inability to offer a political alternative, a fact Edano acknowledged on September 15. As a result, powerful sections of the Democrat bloc, including former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and Ichiro Ozawa, a longstanding right-wing figure among the establishment opposition, backed the merger.

However, the CDP cannot offer a political alternative to the LDP because, just like the latter, the Democrats are defenders of capitalism. While the two parties may

differ in tactics, their goals are ultimately the same.

The Democrats also hope to block the development of an anti-war movement as the LDP, with the backing of numerous right-wing CDP politicians, pushes ahead with plans to revise the constitution, particularly Article 9, which bars Japan from going to war. New Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga has stated he intends to follow in Abe's footsteps and attempt to add a clause to Article 9 that explicitly recognizes the legality of Japan's military.

While the Democrats pay lip service to maintaining Article 9, they represent various positions within the political establishment that fear pushing ahead too quickly with rearmament will trigger explosive opposition from the population, where anti-war sentiment is strong. Others within this bloc are striving to rearm on a more independent basis from the United States, believing that a too-close adherence to the alliance with Washington cuts across the interests of Tokyo.

The Democrats have already demonstrated they have no intention of carrying out any genuine anti-war measures. From 2009 to 2012, the Democrats, then calling themselves the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), held power and failed to fulfill pledges such as moving a controversial US military base on Okinawa. Under Prime Minister Noda, a supporter of Japanese remilitarization, Tokyo "nationalized" the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012, sharply increasing tensions and the danger of war with China. Edano served in Noda's cabinet as minister of economy, trade and industry.

Since being thrown out of office, the Democrats have attempted to posture as opponents of remilitarization by painting the war drive as a product of the Abe government alone. Belying this fact, the DPJ proposed legislation in February 2016 to replace the unpopular "collective self-defense" laws that the LDP had rammed through parliament the previous year that allow the Japanese military to enter conflicts overseas alongside allies. The proposed bill, however, was nearly identical to the LDP's, merely adding the caveat that military action would take place as part of so-called United Nation's peacekeeping operations.

The merger of the CDP and DPP is ultimately nothing but an opportunist, maneuver, carried out in the hopes of blocking the growth of social opposition to

economic inequality and the drive to war. The new party, like its predecessors, lacks any progressive content and will pursue a similarly right-wing and militarist agenda as the LDP if elected to office.

A genuine struggle against the attacks on workers and youth must take the form of a fight for international socialism against capitalism and all its representatives.

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