Migrant workers’ movements (MWMs) in South Korea and Japan are newcomers to the world of social movements, and they are peculiar in that the Japanese and Korean nationals leading the movements are fighting to advance the rights and humane treatment of individuals inside their territorial borders but outside their national polities: foreign workers at the bottom of the economic ladder. The notions of equality, fairness and justice that these groups raise incorporate dimensions or interpretations that are new and challenging to both societies. Both South Koreans and Japanese traditionally have understood equality as stemming from one’s membership in the ethnonational collective. But the presence and difficult plight of migrant workers from poorer parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America challenge this basis for equality and force the liberal interpretation (that is, the idea of individual human rights) into social discourse more emphatically. Moreover, understanding how Japanese and Koreans address the new realities of discrimination and disenfranchisement may tell us something about their past and continuing treatment of those who have long been discriminated against and marginalized: for example, Korean minorities in Japan. MWMs also address new conflicts generated by economic globalization: the challenge to the integrity of national borders, the state’s ability to define the rights and manage the welfare of its citizens, and the displacement and exploitation of the masses who do not direct the globalization project. Their work on behalf of migrant workers may give us a clue as to how contemporary, progressive social movements can challenge the aspects of globalization that abet further economic and social marginalization and powerlessness. Last, MWMs in Japan and Korea are transnational movements by membership, structure and strategy. Efforts to address nationally the issues involving migrant
workers necessarily require international cooperation and transnational coordination. As such, they pose a challenge to the regional and international institutions that facilitate globalization to address the social relations of the process.

The Northeast Asian cases

Comparing MWMs in Japan and South Korea makes sense for several reasons. First, recent migration (1980s to now), mostly intra-Asian, is changing the face of both societies and challenging their long-held self-identities as homogeneous peoples in race, ethnicity, language and culture. Both are dealing with a historical first, the presence of hundreds of thousands of foreigners who not only seek a piece of the economic pie but also bring with them different skin color, languages, religions, education and skills, spices and lifestyles. Gary Freeman and Jongryn Mo (1996, 170) have deemed Japan and South Korea the most restrictionist in terms of migration/immigration policies among labor-importing Asian states. Both governments’ objective has been to permit the entry of limited and controlled numbers of foreigners on a short-term basis in order to alleviate the labor shortage in particular economic sectors, namely construction and small businesses. The labor shortages and restrictive immigration policies together have given rise to hundreds of thousands of undocumented, or ‘illegal’, aliens among the migrant worker population. Because of their undocumented status, and hence little or no legal protection, they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by business owners/managers and labor brokers, as well as to discrimination by the larger population. Unpaid and unequal wages (relative to Japanese or Korean nationals), inability to access accident insurance, arbitrary dismissals, withholding of travel documents by the boss or broker, sexual harassment and violence toward female workers, and discrimination in housing and social activities afflict migrant workers in both countries. Many who work in Korea have faced the additional problem of physical and verbal violence inflicted by their bosses. In both countries, activists and advocates have stepped in to address these and other problems that the foreign workers face. They have taken their cause for nondiscrimination, fair treatment, and legalized status and improved living conditions of migrant workers to the streets in demonstrations and rallies, submitted petitions to government ministries, and addressed the UN Commission on Human Rights through reports and rebuttals to their respective government’s official reports. In addition, they have also forged and strengthened