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Myanmar

Myanmar's Labor Movement Is Central to the Fight Against Authoritarianism

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On Monday [1 February], Myanmar's military seized power in a coup d'état, deposing former international darling Aung San Suu Kyi. The military putsch dramatically exposed Myanmar's widely lauded democratic transition — which came to the world's attention with the freeing of Suu Kyi in 2010 and the first democratic election in decades in 2015 — as fundamentally [flawed](#). The 2008 constitution that governs the country grants the military full control over key ministries and broad authority to declare a [state of emergency](#).

The question of how Myanmar's people will respond now looms large. Suu Kyi and her party remain popular in the country despite her brutal record — which includes enabling the [ethnic cleansing](#) of [Rohingya Muslims](#) — because they're seen as representing an end to military rule and an increased openness to the world.

Meanwhile, the [medical staff](#) in major cities have called for a strike, the country's largest labor federation is urging people [not to cooperate](#) with the military government on labor issues, and a Facebook group titled "[civil disobedience movement](#)" has drawn a hundred eighty thousand likes.

Myanmar's labor movement was building even before partial democratization. A major strike wave swept the country's mostly foreign-owned garment factories in [2009–10](#), which the government met with coercion: quartering off factories and forcing workers and employers to come to a deal, undercutting the momentum of the movement.

But in 2011 the ban on labor unions was dropped, and the following year collective bargaining was legalized. Labor organizing began to come above ground. Labor rights organizations that had served Burmese migrants in Thailand moved to Myanmar and joined their formerly underground comrades. Many labor activists appealed to the liberal rights-based regime in order to rile up workers and gain protection for their unions.

Above all, strikes have been essential to building the movement. In 2019, a wave of walkouts took off in the country's now-massive garment sector — which employs around [six-hundred thousand](#) workers and manufactures Myanmar's chief export — only to collide with the COVID-19 pandemic and its assorted restrictions.

Shortly before the coup, we spoke with Ma Moe Sandar Myint of Action Labor Right, a key organizer of the recent strike wave, to get a better sense of workers' struggles in Myanmar. We tried to reach her after the putsch, but communication is currently being disrupted inside Myanmar. What is certain, though, is that the fight against authoritarianism in Myanmar will be intimately tied to the success of its labor movement.

KL / MH | In 2019, just before COVID-19 hit, there was a strike wave in Myanmar. What caused it?

MSM | Workers were seeing the benefits of the strike. The strike gets them their rights. The strikes get them their wage increase. When one strike happens, other workers see that the strike works. They come to know the taste of the strike, and it is a good taste. The strike also gives them the union.

When there is a strike, workers come out of the factory and they open a strike camp. They get to talk to each other, and they select their union leaders and stewards at that time, and they educate each other. And the organizers educate workers on unionism.

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When they find out that their wages are very low compared to what they produce, they get really agitated. There is no way you can get your rights by sitting idly. You have to collectively fight the employer.

The role of organizer is very important. Let's say the worker comes to the organizer and then the organizer explains that there are many rights violations in the factory, but you cannot solve this problem alone. You have to get together with other workers and you have to talk to them and bring them to us. We will explain more to them.

In that way, they get together and then explain that if we go through the government mechanisms, it would take time.

KL / MH | I'd like to focus on one thing you said: that the union is formed through the strike. Why do you think that's so important?

MSM | Most of the stable unions come from strikes, and most of the unions in our federations went through at least two or three strikes. Even after one strike, there will be a subsequent strike, depending on how the employers treat the workers and the union. So striking is a custom here.

During the strike, organizers ask the workers what they demand from the employer. They write down the demands during the strike from different departments or different production lines.

Participation is high during strikes. Workers are not staying at home. Workers come to the factory like a normal working day with their lunch, then they stay the whole day.

In some cases, the workers sleep in the strike camp and other workers come the next day.

KL / MH | You emphasized workers' participation. Can you talk more about union democracy in the movement?

MSM | For the negotiation to be settled, workers have to vote on whether they like this settlement or that settlement. The union leaders are also elected. Workers elect the executive committee members of the union. According to Myanmar's labor law, there are seven executive committee members. Those seven executive committee members are mostly elected in the strike camp.

The factories are huge, so a few executive committees cannot cover the whole workforce. Each department or each production line elects stewards depending on how many workers are there.

The organizers and the union federation understand that the power is in the hand of the workers, and the unions have their own autonomy. What the federation leaders do is give suggestions and support strikes.

KL / MH | Is labor law in Myanmar favorable to workers?

MSM | The labor laws do not represent the workers. The reason that the labor movement is advancing is because the workers are willing to go on strike. That is what makes the labor movement grow.

To make the laws better and represent the workers' voice, workers have to become strong. They need strikes, because from strike they form unions, and they form the labor movement. That is how it is.

KL / MH | How did you get involved in labor organizing?

MSM | I have been working in the garment sector since I was young. We have summer holidays in high school, so in those summer holidays I went to work as a laborer in a garment factory. In 2000, I finished high school, and went directly to the garment factory and worked there as an office clerk.

In 2015, there were minimum-wage changes in Myanmar. At that time, the minimum wage was 3,600 Kyawt per day [about 2.70 USD]. In my factory, the employer did not pay the minimum wage according to the time frame set by the government.

Workers went on strike for several days. The employer said he would give the money back, so workers ended the strike. However, the employer did not fulfill his promise, and so workers engaged in slowdown actions. The employer retaliated by withholding wages. The case was going through the dispute settlement mechanism in Myanmar, and the Confederation of Trade Union of Myanmar (CTUM) assisted the workers there to form a union. I was only a member at that time.

During that time, the employer sued the sixteen worker leaders under the 341 Penal Code for blockage of a gate. The employer was scaring workers, warning that "the Penal Code can get you into jail." One of the worker leaders asked me about Penal Code 341. I also did not know about that Penal Code 341, so I talked to my husband who told me that it's not that serious. I also talked to a woman leader and learned that that Penal Code is not serious.

So I started talking to those worker leaders and other workers who began to trust me. The workers were not satisfied with their current leaders. The workers wanted to go outside and strike. A woman worker leader decided to lead the strike. There were 306 workers there, and 220 workers follow her to strike. That is how I got involved in the labor movement.

KL / MH | As a female worker yourself, how does the fact that 90 percent of garment workers in Myanmar are women affect your organizing?

MSM | Eight or nine years ago, strikes were led by men. Employers decided to not hire male workers at high rates. Women workers were hired because the employers thought women workers wouldn't fight the employer. What happened was the opposite. Women workers are also willing to go on strike.

Regarding organizing, it is easy when you are the same gender in terms of talking to and convincing other workers. One obstacle is from parents; another obstacle is the partner or, if the worker is married, the spouse.

But against all odds, women leaders get outside of their customs, and traditions, and fight. In the federations especially, most of the leaders are young women who give their time and energy to fight for workers, and they sacrifice a lot. They are even willing to divorce their spouses.

And when they go on strike, those woman leaders are not afraid of being dismissed. They overcome their fear, and they commit their mind. I am very proud of the woman workers leading the strikes and the movement.

KL / MH | You have been working in factories for a long time. You have seen the transition to partial democratization. How big of a difference did it make?

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MSM | Around 2000, there were only a few factories, and workers worked from morning to night. Some even worked the whole year without taking any leave because they were not aware of their rights. And, people couldn't gather because of military rule.

After 2010, the phone and internet gave workers information. Workers got to know their rights and became aware of what was happening in their environment. There were also many more factories, so workers became more connected with each other.

In 2000, workers accepted that the employer was like a God, because the employer gave them food and wages. But after 2010, the views on employers changed, and workers got to know their rights.

KL / MH | How has COVID-19 affected the labor movement in Myanmar?

MSM | When COVID-19 hit, the government imposed restrictions on people gathering. Workers cannot open a strike camp outside factories right now, and this restricts them from going on strikes. As the strikes are not happening, unions are not being formed.

COVID-19 also gives employers the upper hand in oppressing workers, dismissing workers, and cracking down on unions. Because orders are getting low, employers are planning to reduce the workforce.

Although we cannot strike, we have to keep strong and resilient, and when the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted we will fight back. Then the strike wave will happen again.

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Source: [Jacobin Magazine](#).

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