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Myanmar

Myanmar Workers and Unions on the Front Lines in Fight Against Coup

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On late Friday evening, February 26 (local time), the Myanmar military declared most of the country's labor organizations illegal on public television, with the threat of arrests if their activities continue, adding to the urgency of international solidarity activities.

On February 1, the Myanmar military staged a coup and seized power from the elected civilian government under the pretext of alleged election fraud. The coup leaders detained top government leaders and activists, shut off the internet, and suspended flights. This marks a dark and uncertain turn in the country's decade-long, fraught experiment with partial democratization.

The coup threatens to reverse gains in Myanmar in democratic rights. A strong labor movement has been building for a decade through militant struggle by factory workers, preparing them for a strong showing in the current uprising. Building on the growing walkouts by public and private sector workers over the last three weeks, the general strikes since February 22 are now offering the best hope to resist the coup and to build a stronger labor movement beyond.

Workers' revolt

Soon after the coup was declared, a massive, civil disobedience movement emerged, with workers and trade unions front and center. In one of the earliest mobilizations, medical workers from over 110 hospitals and health departments in 50 townships across Myanmar were among the first who rose up and went on strike, two days after the coup. In one government hospital, 38 out of 40 doctors and 50 out of 70 nurses struck.

"There is no way we can work under a dictatorship," said Dr. Kyaw Zin, a surgeon who led one of the first strikes. "I am pretty sure we can bring down the regime. We will never go back to work until [Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the coup leader] steps down. He has no right to tell us to come to work, because no one recognizes him as the leader."

The trade union federations were quick to mobilize. The Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM), the largest trade union federation in Myanmar, called for the first general strike on February 8. Despite threats of arrest and growing repressive tactics from the government, workers in a wide range of sectors, including garbage collectors, firefighters, electricity workers, private bank employees, and garment workers initiated waves of strikes, and many joined street demonstrations.

Teachers were quick to join the movement with their students. Seven teachers' unions, including the 100,000-strong Myanmar Teachers' Federation that covers primary and higher education and monastery schools, announced work stoppages.

Journalists, too, have been walking off of the job. In response to the coup and threats to media freedom, members of the Myanmar Press Council and more than a dozen journalists at The Myanmar Times have resigned.

Importantly, employees from municipal governments and the ministries of Commerce, Electricity and Energy, Transport and Communications, and Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation have joined the strike actions, leaving many departments deserted in the past week. The labor actions hit particularly hard in the transportation sector.

According to an official from the Myanmar Railways (MR), 99 percent of railway employees are on strike, leading to a shutdown of train services.

Striking workers managed to shut down the military-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, Myanmar National Airlines, mines, construction sites, garment factories, and schools, creating economic costs for the military rulers. The workers were joined by consumers boycotting the military's extensive business interests in food and beverage products, cigarettes, the entertainment industry, internet service providers, banks, financial enterprises, hospitals, oil companies, and wholesale markets and retail businesses.

The military has responded with repression. Workers and students have been arrested for participating in the peaceful protests, and the military has started to use deadly force, already killing three.

Garment workers paved the way

Myanmar workers' militancy has been building over several years. As the country opened itself up for foreign direct investment nearly a decade ago, the government agreed to major labor law reforms, legalizing trade unions and codifying labor rights in the 2011 Labor Organization Law. It also incorporated labor dispute resolution mechanisms in its 2012 Labour Disputes Settlement Law.

However, Myanmar labor activists have argued that the laws seek to channel workers into legal avenues that are far less powerful than their militant, mass actions to demand real improvements to harsh working conditions and the low minimum wage, which currently stands at 4,800 kyats (U.S.\$3.26 per day).

A wave of militant strikes swept the garment sector in 2019 to demand higher wages and safer working conditions. The \$6 billion industry, which employs 700,000 mostly female workers, supplies global brands such as H&M, Zara, C&A, among others. It accounted for 30 percent of Myanmar's exports that year—up from 7 percent in 2011, when the country's democratic reforms began.

"When one strike happens, other workers see that the strike works," said Daw Moe Sandar Myint, a leader of the Federation of Garment Workers Myanmar and herself a former garment worker, describing the strike wave in the garment sector. "They come to know the taste of the strike, and it is a good taste. The strike also gives them the union."

But the onset of Covid was a setback for militant union struggles, interrupting the strike wave and the growing unionization in the sector. Employers took advantage of the business disruptions wrought by the pandemic to bust unions by laying off their members.

Factory workers' demands for a minimum wage increase and safer conditions were also ignored, and they suffered wage cuts or delayed wage payment. Many fought back despite the more difficult organizing conditions; workers at multiple factories went on strike early in the pandemic to receive their unpaid salaries and compensation for their dismissal.

For example, in March 2020, the Myan Mode garment factory permanently fired all 520 union members and withheld their wages, citing Covid, while keeping its 700 non-union workers. The union organized protests and was able to secure withheld wages for the dismissed workers.

Despite the setbacks during the pandemic, when the Myanmar military moved to undermine democracy, many garment workers felt they had had enough and were ready for a fight. “Workers were already angry, they were already activated”, said Daw Moe Sandar Myint, who has been on the frontlines of the movement against the coup. “A familiar feeling of suffering had returned and they could not stay silent.” This anger pushed her and many others to lead factory workers into the movement.

Garment workers were among the first to call for street protests and mobilize in the street despite the coup leaders’ stern warning. This helped boost the confidence of the civil disobedience movement. As Andrew Tillett-Saks, a labor organizer based in Myanmar, emphasizes, “The sight of industrial workers, largely young, women garment workers, seems to have deeply inspired the general public, broken down some of the fear, and catalyzed the massive protests and general strike we are seeing now.”

“Workers and unions are the main force of the movement in Yangon [the country’s largest city],” labor and human rights activist Thet Swe Win agreed. “Because there are many thousands of workers from the factories, their gatherings in the street are going to get a lot of attention from the people.

“They are taking a lot of risks to take this kind of action,” she said. “Many of the labor leaders have been fired before. They have been oppressed by the government and factory owners. They are very vulnerable but they are very dedicated.”

For her role in mobilizing and leading garment workers in the civil disobedience movement, Daw Moe Sandar Myint’s home was raided on February 6. She was able to avoid arrest, and miraculously continues to lead protests by day. But by night, she has to hide from the authorities looking for her.

The organized participation of workers and their unions in both the public and private sectors is one of the most crucial factors pushing the civil disobedience movement forward and determining the future of Myanmar.

Tillett-Saks pointed out that the civil disobedience movement has been led primarily by government employees and garment workers in the private sector. He believes that they are the last line of defense against the military dictatorship. The more recent general strikes since February 22 have seen participation from workers across a greater spectrum of Myanmar society. The challenge remains to further expand worker militancy and increase strike actions among more private sector and non-unionized workers.

Why international solidarity matters

In the face of increasing repression by the military—including the issuance of arrest warrants for eight CTUM leaders earlier this week—international pressure is more urgent than ever to protect the democratic rights of workers and their unions.

“International support means a lot to us,” said Thet Swe Win. “It helps us feel we are not alone, and to know there are people out there supporting our freedom and liberty.”

Labor and human rights groups have organized protests outside of Myanmar embassies and issued solidarity statements condemning the coup in Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Cambodia, and the Philippines, among other places.

Strike fund

Workers and unions can contribute to a strike fund that has been set up to support Myanmar labor unions. Now is the moment to apply the direct pressure that is needed to force the military to back down.

It is not difficult to understand why the movement has found resonance and sparked such an outpouring of support in the region. Protesters in other countries express solidarity given the common challenge of undemocratic rule and ongoing repression against unionists and civil society groups. Places like Hong Kong and Thailand have recently seen their own mass democratic protest movements.

Kamz Deligente at the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights in the Philippines, which has been campaigning against violent attacks on unionists in the country, said: "The Filipino people can also identify with the struggle of Myanmar, as our current government, specifically the Executive branch, is dominated by retired military men and is running the country under a de facto martial law. This greatly contributed to the intensified attacks against activists and critics of Duterte and his administration."

MIGRANT WORKERS

Many countries in the region are also connected through migrant workers from Myanmar who work in factories, construction, fishing, and other sectors. In Thailand, a few dozen of the estimated three to four million migrant workers from Myanmar protested in front of the Myanmar embassy in the days immediately after the coup. In Japan, hundreds of Myanmar workers also held a protest outside of the United Nations office.

In Taiwan, around 400 Myanmar immigrants rallied to condemn the military coup in New Taipei City, where many of them live. Lennon Ying-Dah Wong of Serve the People Association, which works with immigrant workers, warned, "A dictatorship ruled by the notorious junta might embrace a migrant-export policy to squeeze fees and remittances from its citizens who are forced to go abroad to work, but also totally neglect their rights. If this happens, it will endanger the rights and welfare of not only Burmese migrant workers, but all migrant workers and Taiwanese workers as well."

Pressure the brands

The Industrial Workers' Federation of Myanmar, the country's largest garment worker union, has called on global unions to pressure brands doing business in Myanmar to condemn the coup and cut ties to businesses that benefit the military's interests (see box below for a list). It has also called for workers to be protected from dismissal for protesting.

Ten international unions representing 200 million workers have called on unions globally to ramp up pressure on governments and corporations to target the commercial interests of the Myanmar military.

For unions and rank-and-file workers in the U.S. and elsewhere, building concrete solidarity with Myanmar workers means actively responding to such calls by issuing statements to condemn the coup, pressuring companies that do business in Myanmar to do the same, and calling for employers to sever any ties in their supply chains with the business interests of the military.

Workers in Myanmar have demonstrated that direct actions are powerful and they work. Whether by organizing and engaging in militant strikes in their workplace, or by walking off their jobs and joining street demonstrations, they are fighting to defend their democratic rights and win a better life for workers in the country and around the world. They

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need—and deserve—our support.

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