

'We can't accept it': Myanmar's public sector workers strike for democracy

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As a government worker adjusts her conical hat, protesters move forward with their umbrellas to shield her from the sun. Many of her colleagues on strike against the [Myanmar](#) military coup have gone into hiding, but she is sat outside a police barricade.

"I have two children," says the 34-year-old. "This is for their future, because if the regime stays in power, there will be no hope."

When the military overthrew the democratically elected National League for Democracy government on 1 February, the woman chose to oppose the generals. She has sacrificed her \$100 (£71) monthly salary at a state-run children's hospital, but more painfully, she can no longer help the patients.

"I had no choice," she says.

Her protest outside the Central Bank of Myanmar in the country's biggest city, Yangon, is a tactical move intended to put pressure on other public sector workers to join the growing civil disobedience movement. Pockets of demonstrators across the country have adopted the same approach, dispersing from mass rallies to government buildings and housing in a bid to claw back democracy.

The three-week-old junta has tried to normalise its power grab, but activists say it has also revealed vulnerability in a series of anxious statements urging civil servants to return to work. Trains have stopped, banks have closed and tax collectors have gone home.

Some estimate that 30% of civil servants are on strike but it is hard to give an accurate figure, and even those who continue working may have trouble getting paid, because many employees at the Myanmar Economic Bank, which distributes their salaries and pensions, are said to have walked out.

Min Ko Naing, a leader in the pro-democracy 1988 uprisings, wrote in a Facebook post that the civil servants' strike would determine the outcome of the protest. A prominent monk and a teachers' federation echoed his message, while grassroots efforts have emerged to cover salaries and living costs.

The regime has reacted with night-time arrests of dissident civil servants, triggering residents to form neighbourhood watch groups determined to protect them. It has created and expanded laws to punish them, or people who encourage them, with up to seven years in jail.

Min Aung Hlaing, whose laminated image has been plastered on pavements, has reactivated a despised order to report overnight guests. The information ministry's new deputy minister, a brigadier-general, threatened to take action against those who continued to strike.

Soldiers and police in Myanmar's second city, Mandalay, violently broke up a crowd this week that was trying to persuade state bank staff to quit. The security forces also marched on housing for

railway workers on strike, firing rubber bullets and slingshots. At least four people were injured in the two incidents.

A 23-year-old employee at the army-run Customs Department says about 30% of its 1,800 or so workers had joined the movement, and that at least 900 had a military background and would probably remain at their desks, including his boss.

“He threatened to fire me,” he says, on his 13th consecutive day of protest. “At first I was afraid and worried but now I don’t care about my job anymore. This movement is more important. I would rather die than have a military government.”

A health ministry officer says she has been on strike since day one of the coup. “I will never work under the military government,” she says. “Their pressure doesn’t scare me.”

Initiatives to cover civil servant salaries are at an early stage, but an organiser behind the mutual-aid fund Get Well Soon Myanmar says the support will be crucial. His group has provided food and cash for about 700 civil servants in two weeks.

“Many are scared,” he says. “Some want to see how things will escalate before they decide to join, but I think the numbers will increase.”

Outside the Central Bank of Myanmar, the children’s hospital worker says the campaign of non-cooperation is “the way we can bring back democracy”.

“The military said they would take people in their own hospitals, but they are turning them away because they can’t handle it,” she says, standing up to chant again. “What the soldiers did was an injustice, and we can’t accept it.”

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