

Workers in Myanmar Are Launching General Strikes to Resist the Military Coup

Wednesday 10 March 2021, by [Ma Ei Ei Phyu](#), [MYINT Ma Moe Sandar](#), [HAACK Michael](#), [HLAING Nadi](#), [Ma Tin Tin Wai](#)
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Despite a vicious crackdown that has left scores of protesters dead, the worker-led movement against the military coup in Myanmar continues to rock the country. We spoke with three female garment workers who helped organize another general strike this week.

As work stoppages, walkouts, and marches rocked the streets, garment workers proved crucial to the movement against military rule. On February 22, the growing momentum culminated in a nationwide general strike with garment workers at the center. They demanded the reinstatement of the government of Aung San Suu Kyi (who, despite enabling the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims, remains popular among Burmese workers for ending military rule and expanding labor rights).

Myanmar's garment industry is massive, having swelled [to six hundred thousand workers](#) in the last decade, and in recent years it has been hit by wildcat strikes and militant labor organizing. Now, workers are applying the know-how they acquired from years of labor organizing to the struggle against a return to military rule.

Organizing at the points of production and distribution, and grinding the country to a halt, may be the only hope to force the military to the negotiating table. And whether workers can access necessities while continuing to strike may make or break the anti-coup movement. Workers' unions and federations have, with some success, called on landlords to withhold rent collection for those participating in the strikes. Unions have also called on international brands like The North Face and H&M to pressure factories not to fire those who miss work due to their involvement in the movement.

On the evening of February 27, *Jacobin* caught up with FGWM's Ma Ei Ei Phyu and Ma Tin Tin Wai just after labor organizations were officially banned. The next day saw the bloodiest crackdown to date. By nightfall on the 28th, at least eighteen people had been killed, and the slogan "my head is bloodied, but unbowed" emerged.

Protests have shown little sign of slowing even as the crackdown escalates, with another [thirty-eight](#) protesters slain on March 3 and casualties among protesters becoming a near-daily occurrence. Just yesterday, on the evening of the first day of another general strike, we were able to catch up with Ma Moe Sandar Myint, who addressed some of the same questions as her comrades.

MH/NH | How does it make you feel to know that the garment workers were some of the first to strike against the coup?

MEEP | I can't even find a suitable word for my feeling. I feel very satisfied with our work. The garment workers ignited the protest.

MMSM | The people are proud of us. On day one of the strike, the workers came with their own lunch. Later, they didn't have to because the people provided them food.

MH/NH | What are the implications of the coup for workers?

MEEP | The NLD didn't create absolute protections for labor, but there were some huge developments. It gave us hope to improve our wages.

Before the NLD held office, we didn't know what labor law or labor rights were. We were arbitrarily dismissed by employers for complaints.

Under the military dictatorship, our labor rights will be violated. We can't accept the dictatorship at all. Even if we will be dismissed from the factory because of striking and protests, we will fight until the end.

MTTW | We are fighting for the whole country. If the military leadership is to win, there will be no labor unions. And if there are labor unions, they will not be real labor unions: the government will intervene, and the union will become only for show.

MMSM | Workers want democracy because we have thoughts, and we are not passive. We need freedom to ask for workers' rights — protection and benefits. Only democracy can provide that.

MH/NH | How did the strike first get organized?

MEEP | We held a meeting for all workers and started talking about labor rights, rights that we are losing under the dictatorship.

On February 5, the workers decided to march. We were faced with police. I was very afraid, but I also felt recognition from the public that made us feel very important. I started crying because of the public support for the workers. When we got back to our hostel, the police were in front of the factory asking us who was the leader. So, even now, I am hiding. All the unionists are hiding.

MTTW | Starting on February 1, we held an emergency meeting. On February 5, we started a campaign inside the factory. We sang the national anthem and other famous songs from history and the '88 revolution.

Workers wore a red ribbon on their clothes. All factory employees, even the high-level positions, participated. The only trouble was, we didn't have enough red cloth, so we needed to request red cloth from our factory and use the factory's cutter to cut it. Normally the lunch break is thirty minutes. The factory union announced the workers should finish their lunch in ten minutes and participate in the campaign for the other twenty minutes.

We decided to protest on February 6, joining other groups such as students. We held sit-in protests on the road of the Sagaing industrial zone, marched to the Central Bank of Myanmar and the local ILO [International Labour Organization] office, and put pressure on the brands.

In Hlaing Tharyar there are about three hundred factories. Almost all of the factories participated. If a factory has a union inside, the union organized the strike, and the workers all joined. In the factories without a union, the workers individually got their leave and also participated in the protest. So the crowd was huge.

MMSM | When we heard about the coup, we didn't have the internet for the first half of the day because it was cut off by the military. So we bought a radio and we listened to the news. Our union

chair discussed and coordinated with other union factories and held an emergency meeting with all the unions. We needed to figure how to fight the military. We couldn't do it alone; we would need the participation of the whole population.

We were contacted by student activists. We said, "If you are interested in combining efforts, let's meet. We are used to strikes at the factories, but we have never struck against the military with guns. We have not engaged in political strikes before. Since you have a lot of followers and experience with political protests, let's collaborate."

MH/NH | What was the significance of the general strike?

MEEP | Every group in the public joined in the protest as well. The people resisted this system founded in blood. So the general strike was very important to let the leader know, "We don't want you. And we all are against the dictatorship."

MH/NH | What are some challenges to organizing?

MMSM | There are plenty of challenges. Parents often do not condone women and girls participating in politics or union activities. Our parents are farmers and we were born in villages. We were raised with village traditional norms, like a girl had to wear her longyi all the way to the toe and cover up. Women were discouraged from going out at night. When I first started engaging in workers protest, my parents were worried. But my husband is very supportive of my union engagement, and he's always encouraging me.

Workers do not receive pay for the time that they are on strike, and this creates a problem with paying rent. Some landlords sympathize with workers and have reduced the rent for the period when they are on strike, while in other cases workers have been evicted.

MH/NH | What would you like our readers to know about the situation on the ground?

MTTW | We need international support for the current movement. In the '88 revolution, a lot of people were killed by the military and I don't want such a situation again.

When I heard about the people that had been killed and shot by the military, I became very, very angry — I wanted to shout out to the international community to help the workers of Myanmar.

MMSM | Some workers have been fired, or had their salaries cut. Among those fired are pregnant women, women with young children, and women who are breadwinners of the family. The rent issue, combined with the factories letting go of these workers, put them in a dire situation financially.

The ILO Commission stipulates that owners cannot pressure workers. Workers are free to exercise their rights. We want people to pressure brands such as Adidas, Zara, and H&M to ensure that workers are guaranteed their rights to protest. Since we issued our [statement](#) to the companies, we haven't heard any reaction from them so far.

Media is also necessary. We need more media attention on our workers' efforts and the risks they are taking to take to the streets. The more people know about us and our efforts, the more protection we have in case something happens to us.

MEEP | I am from a farmers' family in the Ayeyarwady Region. In my youth, the government made farmers give a duty fee of some rice. When I was in grade four, our family couldn't make enough rice because of the weather. So the police arrested our grandfather and our cousin. My brother, sister, and I needed to be hidden and we faced hunger.

Even after being released from prison, my grandfather still had to give rice to the government. But we could not make enough. So we had to hand over our land and we became very poor. My brother and I had to drop out of school. My father took me to the city, where I did not pass the matriculation exam.

So that is the reason why I really hate the military dictatorship. We experienced lots of bad things under that system. I can't allow this to happen to this generation, to my son and my daughter. That's the reason why I want to fight.

MMSM | We are not doing this to gain power, or positions. Workers know how to live under pressure and how to fight against injustice. We cannot live under military rule. We'd rather die than live under oppression.

Seeing the death of the protesters, especially the young ones, is heartbreaking. As a mother in the fight, I feel it more intensely. The more I see their suffering, the more I want to fight, even at the risk of death. Those who die now are unbreakable.

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