

# For Myanmar workers, another problem emerges: labor abuse

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## **Employees say they are forced to work overtime and their pay is often late since the Feb. 1 coup.**

Factory managers in Myanmar are suppressing workers' rights, with mandatory overtime and late payment of wages now routine following the Feb. 1, 2021, military coup that overthrew civilian rule in the country, sources say.

One worker at a foreign-owned garment factory in Yangon told RFA she now works 11 hours a day but receives no pay for overtime work. Managers have now "taken the upper hand" in their dealings with employees, she said.

"They'll give you overtime pay, or they may not. This is the sort of situation that we're in," Hnin Hnin said. "A typical work day is eight hours, and if we work for 10 hours, those extra two hours should be overtime.

"But they will give that only if the quota for production is reached, and if a piece of cloth falls onto the floor, the price of that cloth is deducted from our wages," she said.

Around 8,000 workers are employed at her factory, with almost all of them facing the same situation, she said.

Otto — a worker at a sweater factory in Yangon region's Hlaing Tharyar township — told RFA he has still not received wages owed to him for 10 months of work after his factory closed due to the country's COVID-19 pandemic.

"We asked for our normal daily wage, and they said they could not pay. Then we asked for half that amount, and they still wouldn't pay," he said. "Later, we appealed to the Labor Office for arbitration, and they decided I should be paid 50,000 kyat [U.S. \$28] for each of five months that I had worked."

The factory then reopened for a month, and closed again for another three months, he said.

"The 50,000 kyat per month allowed by the Labor Department is not enough to cover our cost of living, as food and accommodation alone cost around 70,000 kyat per month. But as the Labor Office has already fixed this as the rate, we don't know what to do," he said.

Khine Zar Aung, president of the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar, said she has received at least 50 complaints about rights violations that can be passed on for litigation.

"Most of these cases are in the garment sector, and though we can help with cases in the garment and footwear sectors, we can't help anyone not working for international brands," she said. "There is no rule of law here, so there are cases where rights are being seriously violated, and we can't do

anything about these at all.”

Around 40,000 garment workers are now without jobs in Myanmar as a result of the Feb. 1 coup, but the military has arrested members of trade unions and other workers’ organizations in the country, making it difficult to organize a legal defense.

Myanmar’s Ministry of Labor has denied reports that workers are not receiving the minimum pay allowed by law, but workers in the garment industry say most are not receiving full pay, overtime pay, or severance pay when separated from their jobs.

Reporting on labor rights in the year before the coup, the U.S. State Department noted “continued reports of employers engaging in forms of antiunion discrimination,” including firing or other forms of reprisal against workers who formed or joined labor unions.

“Trade unions reported cases in which criminal charges were filed against workers for exercising their right to strike, and trade union members were arrested and charged with violating peaceful assembly laws when holding demonstrations regarding labor rights generally,” said the agency’s 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

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