

Teachers on the run: striking public sector workers hunted by Myanmar's military

Wednesday 2 February 2022, by [LIAN Flora](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2022).

Protests against the coup mean hospitals and schools are on the brink of collapse, while workers have left their homes to avoid arrest and interrogation

When hundreds of thousands of workers across the country walked out of their jobs in protest at the military's seizure of power in [Myanmar](#) on 1 February 2021, Grace* was among the first to join.

Although she was seven months pregnant, the middle-school teacher from Chin state was determined to resist the military by refusing to work under its administration. Joining her was her husband, also a government employee.

What they didn't then know was that nearly a year later, their hands, once accustomed to holding chalk and pens, would instead be holding hoes and shovels, calloused and blistered from farming under the scorching sun. Nor did they ever imagine that they would be living in hiding, on the run from soldiers and police.

"My husband and I decided to strike soon after the coup was staged. For fear of being arrested by the police, we haven't been able to return home for nine months," says Grace, talking to the Guardian from an undisclosed location.

"Two of my family members were arrested because of me. Our houses were raided. We have no regular source of income and have to struggle every day to make a living. But never have I ever regretted joining the civil disobedience movement, not even once. We are part of the revolution against the military dictatorship."

In the year since the coup, Myanmar has been plunged into chaos and a spiralling economic crisis as the military responds to the widespread civilian defiance to its rule with deadly violence and mass arrests.

Some of its main targets are the hundreds of thousands of public sector workers, including teachers, nurses and doctors participating in a campaign of civil disobedience and refusing to serve the regime.

Public hospitals are [barely functioning](#), and when state schools opened in June, more than half the teachers were [absent](#). Private and public bank workers have also been [striking](#) en masse, and even withdrawing cash is now [near-impossible](#).

In an effort to crush the movement and make people return to their jobs, military forces have started hunting down striking public sector workers across the country and [raiding their homes](#).

Since the strikes began in February, at least 140 people have been arrested for their participation, of whom 107 remain in detention, the Guardian was told by the Assistance Association for Political

Prisoners (AAPP), a Myanmar-focused rights monitoring group.

The AAPP says at least eight of those taking part in the civil disobedience movement have [died](#) in military interrogation centres, and seven of the bodies showed signs of torture.

Families have also been targeted. Since the coup, 46 people have been taken as [hostages](#) in an attempt to force their family members participating in civil disobedience to turn themselves in; 39 of these hostages are still in custody, according to the AAPP.

Grace went into labour shortly after she left her home. With family members being targeted by police raids, she was so scared of being arrested she registered at the hospital under a fake name. Her husband did not dare accompany her.

The military has also attempted to force those who are taking part in the strikes to return to work by making it harder for them to survive. It has [evicted](#) thousands from worker housing, and stopped paying salaries. Last May, more than 125,000 striking teachers had their contracts [suspended in an attempt to try and force them back into the classroom](#).

The Guardian spoke with seven teachers in Chin state who are still on strike. They all said their only financial support was community donations, which were irregular and amounted to less than half of their former income.

For Grace and her family this is not enough to survive. In June, the couple began farming corn. On weekends, they sell fried snacks to make ends meet. They still face the constant risk of arrest.

As violence and military attacks escalate across the country, many teachers and other public sector workers who have gone on strike are now also living under the shadow of war. Since May, fighting has dramatically increased. The military has sought to quell armed resistance by [attacking](#) entire civilian populations, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that more than 400,000 people have been displaced from their homes.

Intensifying military attacks caused Ling Kee*, a high school headteacher who joined the civil disobedience movement and went on strike last year, to leave the town of Thantlang in August with his three adult daughters, also strikers, and his wife.

They took shelter with relatives in Hakha township, but a month later had to flee again upon hearing that soldiers were going door to door hunting down strikers. With nothing but the nightclothes they were wearing, they drove motorbikes through the night along mountain roads until they crossed the border into India. .

Unable to work there, they are relying on their savings to survive.

Students have also joined taken action against military-run services. After weeks of [protests](#) over a military “slave education system” in May, only 10% of the country’s nearly 10 million people of school age [registered](#) this year, according to the Myanmar Teachers’ Federation.

When state schools [opened](#) across the country in June, many of them guarded by armed soldiers, classrooms were empty.

To ensure that youth do not miss out on their education, churches, civil society organisations and striking teachers have established multiple grassroots education channels, supported by community donations. But funds are limited, and teachers also worry that their classes could get caught in the crossfire of the ongoing fighting, a teacher from Kanpetlet township told the Guardian.

Biak* had just one year of high school left when the coup happened.

Now living in a refugee camp in Mizoram, India, after her home was destroyed in a military attack, she is unable to study because there are no education facilities. “Currently, my family doesn’t have a house to live in, and I have no chance to study. All of my dreams were reduced to ashes, just like the homes in Thantlang, including mine,” she says.

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