

Myanmar railway workers stay defiant even after junta evicts them from homes

Wednesday 28 April 2021, by [HAACK Michael](#), [HLAING Nadi](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2021).

- **The military has forced out hundreds of families from government-issued housing for being involved in strikes and protests against the February 1 coup**
- **Nearly all of Myanmar Railway's 20,000 workers are on strike, shutting down a sector that transports not only people, but goods, harvest and military supplies**

When Myanmar railway switch operator Ko Thet, 34, and his family were evicted on March 22 from the home they had lived in for generations, they did not have time to pack much.

The family of six took “only our essentials: clothes, some pots, and bowls”, he said.

They were among the hundreds of families in Mandalay who were forced out of their government-issued housing for taking part in strikes and protests against the February 1 coup that have ground the country's economy to a halt.

At the Ma Hlwa Gone railway station in Yangon, the military raided the residential compound of 800 striking railway workers at the crack of dawn last month. Thousands were evicted and at least three people were arrested.

But the punishment for supporting the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) has done little to convince the workers to return to work and restore business activity.

“When the rail system shuts down, everything else shuts down,” said Maung Hlain, a 36-year-old accountant who chose to work for the railway in part to continue living in government-issued housing, after his father, also a railroad worker, retired.

Myanmar Railway employs 20,000 people nationwide, nearly all of whom are on strike. These workers operate the country's 8,000km of tracks that stretch from the commercial capital in Yangon into the mountainous regions that are controlled by ethnic armed organisations.

While trucks are the primary method of internal shipping, rail reaches certain hard-to-access regions, and many merchants and farmers rely on it to transport their goods and harvest.

Passenger rail is also important. In 2019, trains carried nearly 37 million passengers. The Yangon Circular Train, covering 39 train stations over a 47km route, is used by about 100,000 daily commuters, predominantly from working-class townships. The military also uses it to transport troops and supplies.

Tun Myint, a professor of political science at Carleton College in Minnesota, said it showed “pure stupidity” on the part of the junta to boot out striking workers. General Ne Win, who ruled Myanmar with an iron fist from 1962 to 1988, had always treated the living quarters of railway workers as a political base of the ruling party, then the Burma Socialist Programme Party.

"If you worked for the government ministries and lived in those housings, you are easier to control and surveil," said Tun Myint.

But the past decade of democratic reforms, including the mass availability of mobile phones, had allowed railway workers and their families to integrate more into society, blunting the military's ability to wield social control.

"Smartphones provide a big window to the world via their small screens," Tun Myint said.

Echoing this sentiment, Maung Hlain said: "The government and civil servants have become closer to the people."

Evictions might have seemed like a logical tool for the regime that is well versed in the tactic, according to James C. Scott, a professor of political science at Yale University.

"One thing the military regime has done from the beginning is forced resettlement," he said.

"[In] Yangon and Mandalay, the urban population is now experiencing forced displacements and indiscriminate killings that the ethnic nationalities have been experiencing for the last 30 years," he added, referring to the brutal tactics often deployed by the military against ethnic insurgencies on their borderlands.

"Over the last 10 years, evictions in Myanmar were a little less political and more economic," said Geoff Aung, an anthropology PhD student at Columbia University who researches social movements and development in Myanmar.

"Between 2011 and 2013, there was a land rush of sorts where a lot of people were kicked off their land with the expectation of foreign investment," he said. "Is there any economic logic to [the railway workers'] evictions? I don't think there is. It is not like it gets them back to work, restores capital flows ... If anything, it makes that more difficult."

With evictions having failed to produce the military's desired outcomes, it has ratcheted up other methods of coercion. New orders for families to maintain a list of registered family members in a given household have made it more challenging for good Samaritans to provide temporary shelter to protesters on the run for fear of reprisal.

The nighttime raids and random shootings by the military meant that some railway workers and their families are forced to hide in nearby cemeteries.

"The level of resistance against the military varies from class to class, with workers and working-class communities showing the fiercest resistance," said Maw Kun Thit, a documentary filmmaker from Myanmar. "They are willing to lose everything."

Ko Thet, who has now relocated to a safe house in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Mandalay, does not tell his new neighbours he used to be a railway worker - let alone one who is engaged in the CDM - for fear of informants, locally known as *dalans*.

"There are nighttime shootings by the military. No one dares to sleep before 2am, not until the shooting dies down," said Ko Thet. "Once the shooting starts in our streets, everyone switches off their lights in their apartments and sits in darkness for hours."

Besides the security concerns, the workers worry about their finances. Both Ko Thet and Maung Hlain have not collected their salaries since the start of their strike on February 8. They are living

off donations from CDM leaders, which is only a stopgap measure.

Having specialised skills limited to the rail ministry – such as maintaining Myanmar’s diverse fleet that contains everything from recently-acquired diesel engines to steamers dating back to the colonial era – means they have little to no prospects to find jobs elsewhere in an economy that has largely stalled.

So far, this has not deterred the protesters. “I don’t want the salary given by the military,” said Maung Hlain. “CDM is our only weapon against oppression. It’s working. We know we will win.”

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South China Morning Post

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3130905/myanmar-railway-workers-stay-defiant-even-after-junta-evicts>