

Workers Are Still Launching Nationwide Strikes Against Myanmar's Military Coup

Thursday 10 June 2021, by [AUNG U](#), [Dr SASA](#), [THUZAR Ma](#) (Date first published: 9 June 2021).

Workers in Myanmar have been on strike for more than 100 days, bravely resisting the military junta. In an interview with *Jacobin*, three members of the anti-coup movement explain why they're still fighting despite dire economic straits and widespread violence.

As Myanmar fades from international headlines, the situation on the ground has intensified and the anti-coup coalition's demands have become more radical. The National Unity Government (NUG), which emerged as an alternative to the coup government, has called for abolishing both the 2008 constitution (which granted the military broad powers over key government ministries) and [the 1982 citizenship law](#) (pivotal to the persecution and political exclusion of the Rohingya minority).

Made up of prominent activists, leaders from different ethnic groups, and democratically elected ministers who managed to evade arrest in the early days of the February coup, the NUG is the closest thing the country has to a representative body of Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups. It is the only politically viable alternative to the military junta, which continues to terrorize the population.

The NUG has called on nations around the world to recognize it as the legitimate government of Myanmar. International consensus and acknowledgement of its authority would allow the NUG to take on the legislative and administrative roles of a government, including drafting a new constitution, issuing passports, and funding the [People's Defense Force](#) it set up to shield civilians from the military. It would also grant them access to Myanmar's billion dollars in foreign reserves, which the [United States froze](#) after the coup.

The United States, like many other governments, has maintained a wait-and-see attitude. This puts the NUG in an impossible spot. Without the financial resources and legislative powers that recognition would give them, the NUG is ill-equipped to meet the conditions placed by the US and international community and deliver on its promises to the people of Myanmar.

Meanwhile, workers have continued to stage nationwide strikes, commonly known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). With remarkably high participation in both the private and public sectors, the strikes have pummeled the country's economy and further delegitimized the military junta.

Yet many workers are struggling to meet their most basic needs. By refusing to work for the coup government, they're foregoing their monthly salaries. Some, like the railway workers, have been evicted from their homes. Commodity prices are rising, and threats from the military are ever-present.

At the same time, battles between ethnic militias and the Myanmar military have escalated, with high casualties and increasing ambushes on military bases and counter offenses.

To get a sense of what's happening on the ground, Jacobin interviewed Dr Sasa, minister of

international cooperation for the NUG, and two railway workers participating in CDM — U Aung and Ma Thuzar — both of whom have been on strike since February 4. The three spoke about their life under military rule, the resistance on the ground, and how to sustain workers and their families during the strike — maybe the most important tactical question the NUG is facing.

MH/NH | What part of Burma are you from? What was it like growing up there?

DS | I was born in one of the most remote villages in Chin State [in northwest Myanmar], with no roads, no electricity, and no running water. I saw my mom's best friends die from childbirth complications. Many of my childhood friends died from preventable and curable diseases like diarrhea and malaria. I thought I could be the next victim. It's impossible to explain in human language the pain and suffering that I witnessed at that age.

[In 1988], [the big student uprising happened](#), which was crushed by military forces, and many Chin University students joined the armed revolutionary forces, such as the Chin National Army, to fight against the military junta.

That was also the year when the army came to my village. I was eight or nine years old. They summoned villagers from nearby regions and [subjected them to] forced labor, torture, and rape. We dug the military barracks by hand. We carried the bombs and military equipment on our backs. It was just terrible.

My village didn't have a secondary school, so I had to go to Yangon to continue my education. I arrived in Yangon, and I was lost, man, completely. I lived with farmers and got sexually abused, physically abused. I was bullied in school because I was a village boy.

I finished high school in 1997, which coincided with another wave of student protests that ended badly. The military shut down the universities to end the student movement. Since I couldn't continue my education in Yangon, I decided to try colleges in India, which I afforded by selling chickens, goats, and pigs along the way. After I finished college in India, I wanted to go to medical school in the States, but they were expensive. One day, I picked up a flyer about medical schools in Armenia, which were more affordable to me. I traveled to Armenia in 2002, and from day one, I struggled financially. Finally, after some years, I got a scholarship from the UK. It was a miracle.

Regardless of which tribe, ethnicity, culture, race, color, or gender you are, it doesn't matter. We all need freedom, prosperity, and peace. We all need food on our table for our children.

After medical school, I decided to go back to my people. I was their only doctor. Every day I saw four hundred to five hundred patients. The workload was unbearable. So I started training the villagers. I trained them on basic health care and sanitation. We also trained them on how to deliver babies safely because there were no certified health professionals. Together, we were engaged in lifesaving work, and I was very happy. It was like all of my dreams were coming true.

In 2012, the NLD [National League for Democracy] leadership approached me to join the political movement, but I wanted to be with my people and continue my work with them. I was again approached by the NLD for the 2020 elections, when they came and said, "Please, we desperately need you."

I started the campaign for unity. Regardless of which tribe, ethnicity, culture, race, color, or gender you are, it doesn't matter. We all need freedom, prosperity, and peace. We all need food on our table for our children. That, to me, is politics. My campaign for unity became very successful.

Then on the morning of February 1, we woke up to the news of the [military coup](#). I saw our elected government overthrown and detained. I knew I had to escape to evade arrest. So I dressed up as a taxi driver and fled to the border for safety.

Now I'm with the National Unity Government. I've reached out to my Rohingya brothers and sisters, because their plight is one of the biggest issues in Myanmar. Merely a few months ago, to say the word "Rohingya" on the streets was considered a crime, a taboo. Now, with the creation of the National Unity Government, we have a representative body of elected officials for the first time in the history of Myanmar.

UA | I was born and raised in Thaketa Township [located in eastern Yangon]. I finished high school in Yangon and joined the railway. I've been working there for half my life. I worked as an engineer, and I used to oversee 315 staff in my unit.

I have lived mostly under military dictatorship. I was a teenager when the 1988 uprising happened. Life was full of hardships and injustices.

Things got better under the civilian government of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. We got our rights and freedom back. It did not matter how high up you were in the chain of power. If you did something wrong, you could go to jail, even if you were a minister.

At work, we felt empowered to speak out against our leadership when we saw injustices, and they couldn't coerce us to do things that were outside of our portfolio. We could tell them it was outside of our job description and therefore, we could not accept the task.

When the coup happened on February 1, I decided to join the Civil Disobedience Movement because I know what life is like under their thumb.

MT | I'm also a railway worker and have been working for the railway department for ten years. I'm originally from Bago [an hour drive from Yangon].

On February 4, I decided to join my coworkers and participate in CDM. The reason why? It is the right thing to do and the least we can do as civilians.

Doctors, teachers, and students are risking their lives every day by protesting on the streets. Our strike is our contribution to the fight against injustice, against the military. We do CDM to reject the military occupation.

MH/NH | **The strike has lasted well over one hundred days. What is the importance of strikes/ CDM, and how have you been sustaining yourselves?**

DS | The military generals are afraid of CDM because it rejects working for the military junta. We are also seeing the rise of armed struggle against the military dictatorship, but CDM is one of the strongest leverages against the military junta. It is very, very important.

Once the NUG gets back the country and returns to power, the CDM workers will be compensated for all that they've lost. The people's government will pay them back for all the salaries they've lost during this time and more. Not only do they deserve a [Nobel Peace Prize](#), they deserve our best effort to help them. The bravery of the people of Myanmar is on display to the rest of the world.

UA | From my unit alone, forty-seven staff, including myself, walked out of the office to participate in CDM on February 4. We have endured many challenges, not to mention threats and coercions from the military who wants us to return to work. They want the appearance of everything as business as

usual, and our strike is hindering that. Just a few days ago, I received a letter of suspension from my work because I continue to engage in CDM. I got suspended after twenty-five years of service. Just like that.

“I have moved twice already with my family because it’s not safe for us to stay long in one place and also because of our deteriorating financial situation.”

When my staff and I started doing CDM, our superiors discouraged us. They even issued a letter warning us not to get involved in politics and the consequences of doing so. So we told them no one was coming to our aid. We have to write our own history, so we joined CDM.

We are resolute in our anti-coup resistance, but it’s not without challenges. Ever since we walked out of our offices, many of us have gone into hiding. The military is using every excuse to arrest us for our CDM engagement. I have moved twice already with my family because it’s not safe for us to stay long in one place and also because of our deteriorating financial situation.

Since February, we have been refusing our monthly salaries that would be issued by the military. Not only have our incomes stopped, but it’s also been hard for CDM workers like us to find jobs. Many employers don’t want to hire people like me who are doing CDM because the military could give them a lot of trouble.

Friends and acquaintances give us minor donations from time to time, but it’s barely enough to keep us afloat. We’ve been moving further and further away from the city center to save on rent money. Now we are renting a place temporarily on the outskirts of Yangon, which also makes it difficult for me to find jobs.

MT | Like U Aung, I haven’t received my salary for three months. I live with my mom, who’s getting old and frail.

Even before the coup and before I joined CDM, our financial situation wasn’t good. We had a lot of debt. There were medical expenses that we needed money for. Now that my income has stopped completely, our debt has grown exponentially because we have to keep borrowing from friends and acquaintances to buy food and pay for rent.

In March, we were evicted from our government-housing complex — given to railway workers and their families — because of our participation in CDM. Since then, it’s been hard to find a place to stay for me and my mom.

MH/NH | What can NUG do to help the striking workers?

UA | We need monthly financial assistance from NUG. These days, I pray that no one in my family gets sick because I cannot afford to pay for medical expenses. I can barely afford to buy a single packet of antibiotics for my family, let alone medical treatment if they need it.

We are running out of money, running out of food and medicine, and running out of options for shelter.

MT | It would be helpful for NUG to pay CDM staff members monthly salaries to assist them with basic needs during this time. The military knows which staff is doing CDM and which staff isn’t, based on who shows up for work. They have a list of our names and our family members. We are at risk of arrest anytime.

As a woman, I feel that there’s a substantial risk of bodily harm if I were to get arrested. We’ve

heard reports of how female detainees are mistreated and sexually assaulted at interrogation centers by the military.

We are going to fight until the end, but we need the help of NUG to survive financially.

DS | We are a government of revolution. We are not a government in normal times. Some practical things [have been difficult]. NUG is struggling to even open a bank account in the United States. That's why we are saying to the US government, "please recognize us." There's so much more that we can do for the people of Myanmar. But first, we need the international community to empower us to do just that.

Once we get recognition from the international community, we will be able to function as the government of Myanmar. We'll have access to international markets, and we'll be able to borrow money from international monetary institutions.

Our country is a rich country. From gas and oil revenues alone, the military rakes in 100-plus million dollars a month. Min Aung Hlaing and his cronies are pocketing the wealth that belongs to the people. With that money, they trade with China and Russia for weapons to kill the people. It's very simple.

A lot of people are working really hard behind the scenes. I've been regularly in touch with people in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway who support the CDM. We have received a few million dollars in donations from people in the United States, but there are logistical and security challenges in transferring money into Myanmar. The banking system has collapsed because the bank staff are also on strike, which has led to a shortage of cash flow inside the country.

Our NUG ministers have been meeting with CDM participants daily. We have formed coordination committees so CDM participants on the ground can tell us how our efforts to help them are going. Maybe we can't help all of the hundreds of thousands of CDM workers. But these coordination committees are set up from the village level to the township level, and they cover all 333 townships across the country.

We need to do more. For example, NUG has channeled about \$70,000 in donations to Chin State in the past few months, but what we really need is about \$1 million monthly for each state — maybe even more in poorer states, like Chin State. There are money reserves, but we cannot tap into them because we are not yet recognized by governments. That's the main issue here.

In a recent conversation I had with our allies in the European Union, I highlighted the need to provide assistance to factory workers in the private sector. With the closure of the factories due to COVID and the coup, many are out of a job. They still have families to feed and bills to pay. What do you do?

That's why we are lobbying the international community to increase aid to Myanmar, but to do so through CSOs [civil society organizations], or UN entities or community-based organizations. Not through the military.

MH/NH | **Do you have any final thoughts?**

DS | Our battle is between the light and the darkness. It is between dictatorship and democracy. This is the last revolution for us. We need to put an end to this reign of terror in our generation, so that our children's children do not suffer the same fate. We are not going to give up.

Dr Sasa is the minister of international cooperation for Myanmar's National Unity Government.

U Aung is an engineer for Yangon Railway in Myanmar.

Ma Thuzar is a railway worker at Yangon Railway in Myanmar.

Michael Haack was the campaign coordinator for US Campaign for Burma from 2008 to 2010, and has previously conducted research on Myanmar's history and politics for the McSweeney imprint Voice of Witness and for Yale University MacMillan Center.

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