

Report says soldiers shot three dead at Myanmar factory making US cowboy boots - “The workers simply wanted to be paid”

Tuesday 22 June 2021, by [AFROSE Dil](#), [BAUTISTA Jahan Nidia](#), [HOSKINS Tansy](#), [MAYORGA Juan](#) (Date first published: 17 June 2021).

A labour rights organisation says the soldiers also arrested 17 outside the shoe factory - for asking for wages

When a small group of employees gathered outside the Xing Jia shoe factory on Monday 15 March, it had been shut for a week and they’d been told it would stay that way for three months. In the chaos of civil unrest following the military coup six weeks earlier, supply chains had been disrupted. Strikes had closed banks and ports.

By the end of the day, according to media reports that followed shortly after, several people were dead – shot by soldiers. But the US company that sells cowboy boots made in the factory denied these accounts, preferring the word of a newspaper aligned with the Chinese Communist Party.

Now labour rights campaigners in Myanmar have produced a report examining the events of that day. As with almost every workers’ rights organisation in Myanmar, the group behind the report, Action Labor Rights (ALR), has been declared illegal by the military and its staff are currently in hiding. Due to the ongoing turmoil in Myanmar, openDemocracy has not been able to independently verify all the details of the report.

Some facts have more support, however. It is well known that in Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city, the impoverished Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone – where Xing Jia is located – had become a site of angry resistance. Military violence there was extreme and factories were being set alight amid [martial law](#).

On 15 March, local reports and [international news outlets](#) agree that workers gathered outside the factory and were joined by local people. Soldiers then shot at the crowd, killing several people.

The new report from ALR states that the Xing Jia workers were not there to attack the factory or to protest against the coup. They simply wanted to be paid.

It specifies that they had come to ask for 15 days’ wages plus four hours of overtime pay. Once they had received their money, many of them intended to return to their home towns to escape the violence of the industrial zone and wait for the factory to reopen. The small delegation was accompanied by supportive family members.

ALR’s report states that not long after the workers assembled, a military truck arrived and soldiers started shooting, without any dialogue or questions asked. When the shooting began, local people gathered to support the workers.

The report mentions that it is possible that the military opened fire because they thought the workers were there to set fire to the factory, as had happened recently with other factories that, like Xing Jia, had Chinese owners.

According to the report, the military used live ammunition and four men were shot, three of whom died. An estimated 17 people were then arrested, including women workers from the factory and their family members. The bodies of the dead were taken away by the military; the injured man was taken to hospital.

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On 5 April, six of the people arrested outside Xing Jia were sentenced to three years in prison under harsh [new legislation](#) brought in by the military junta. The six men, including three Xing Jia workers, were sentenced by an army official, Major Hla Tun, at a military court and reportedly are now being held at Yangon's [notoriously inhumane](#) Insein Prison.

‘The Standard of The West Since 1879’

In the aftermath of the fatal shootings described in the report, it was discovered that the Xing Jia shoe factory supplied an unusual customer. Amongst the shipments leaving the chaos of the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone were boxes of cowboy boots destined for the malls and rodeos of the US.

Justin Brands owns a number of iconic footwear brands, including Justin Boots, which bills itself as “an industry-leading western footwear brand handcrafting western boots”. Its tagline is ‘The Standard of The West Since 1879’.

Justin Brands is owned by the investment firm Berkshire Hathaway Inc, whose CEO and chairman is the American billionaire and investor Warren Buffett.

But behind images of herds of cattle, open plains and chequered shirts is a very different story. In July 2020, [citing COVID economic strain](#), Justin Boots closed down its two Missouri factories with the loss of 300 jobs. It now has one factory in El Paso, Texas, but also contracts with factories in China and Myanmar.

When the Xing Jia factory case was taken up by [US-based labour rights monitoring organisation](#) the [Worker Rights Consortium \(WRC\)](#), it contacted the president of Justin Brands to alert the company to military violence at one of its supplier factories.

In emails seen by openDemocracy, Justin Brands acknowledged that it procures goods from Xing Jia, but repeated a statement from its “factory agents” who “called the stories a complete fabrication”. Justin Brands’ email then noted coverage by a Chinese newspaper aligned with the Chinese

Communist Party: “The Global Times even went as far by posted [sic] an article the following day rebuking the demonstrators’ claims clearing [sic] the lies.”

openDemocracy provided Justin Brands with a summary of the ALR report, edited to protect the safety of those involved. In a statement to openDemocracy, a lawyer appointed by Justin Brands said the company does not confirm or deny anything in the ALR report and is conducting an independent investigation into the Xing Jia factory shootings, which it hopes to complete in mid-June.

“[When] a US brand closes domestic factories and relies on an overseas supply chain, that brand has a responsibility to consumers to ensure that these overseas suppliers are not complicit in human rights abuses against workers,” stated Ben Hensler, general counsel and deputy director for policy and research at the WRC.

“Justin Brands has plainly failed in its ethical responsibility to both workers in Myanmar who make its products and the working people in the US who wear them,” he added.

“[The ALR report] is human rights reporting under extremely difficult conditions,” says Bent Gehrt, south-east Asia field director at the WRC. “They are reporting under martial law and a brutal military regime. The people closest to the facts in this case have been declared illegal so they cannot go and freely observe trials.”

An ALR representative has described the process of researching the shooting – entering the industrial zone in disguise, meeting a network of people face to face, changing their travel routes and twice fleeing for their lives from military patrols who had been tipped off by informants.

The report, which was compiled in Myanmar in March and April, is based on five in-country, in-person interviews, plus ten in-country telephone interviews.

Since the military staged a coup in Myanmar in February, the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group, whose figures are used by the United Nations, [estimates](#) (at time of writing) that 865 people have been killed and nearly 5,000 have been detained.

If the ALR report is accurate, the bloody events at the Xing Jia shoe factory show that the coup has connected leading international clothing and shoe brands to harsh and even deadly repression of worker rights through military tribunals, inhumane imprisonment and the murder of civilians.

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