

# Myanmar: Resistance to coup continues, solidarity with workers and youth

Dave Stockton Wed, 10/03/2021 - 13:26

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March has witnessed a steep escalation of repression by Myanmar's military in the Tatmadaw - against completely peaceful and unarmed demonstrators. As well as rubber bullets and live rounds, fragmentation grenades, which emit a hail of ball bearings that cause severe injuries, are being used.

In the northern city of Myitkyina, snipers have fired indiscriminately from buildings along the routes of the demonstrations. In Yangon and other cities, night-time raids are picking up hundreds of people, the number detained is now well over a thousand according to the country's human rights organisations.

An official from the detained Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, NLD, has died in custody, the second within two days.

Faced with increasingly massive demonstrations, Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, is increasingly using lethal force to crush the uprising. Like Macbeth he doubtless thinks "I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er".

According to UN sources, the death toll since February 1 has now topped 50. On February 28 alone, this resulted in 18 deaths and over 30 seriously wounded. Then, on March 3, paramilitary police, using high velocity rifles, killed at least 38 people, including one 14 year old. The killing and maiming took place in Yangon, the country's largest city and industrial centre, in Mandalay and many other cities across the country. But crushing the nationwide revolt will require wading far deeper in blood.

Even so, the steep increase in killings and mass arrests has thus far failed to end the protests. Rather, they have forced demonstrators to take defensive measures. Whilst still remaining completely peaceful, young people have organised lines of "defenders" with helmets and improvised shields, throwing up barricades to impede the passage of military vehicles.

A factor vital to defeating the coup is the increasing role being played by workers in the protests and repeated strikes. The Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar, IWFM, and nine individual unions, called one day general strikes on February 22 and March 8, International Women's Day, in which factories, shops, government offices, banks and railways came out. The Federation of Garment Workers of Myanmar, FGWM, consisting of 20 local unions, has played an important role. Their factories produce for international clothing retailers like The North Face and H&M.

Rail workers, garment workers, civil servants, health workers and copper miners have repeatedly joined the protests. Striking workers from the country's national rail system have had their housing compound besieged by the military, threatening them with arrest. A prominent organiser, Moe Sandar Myint, stated, "Workers are ready for this fight. We know that the situation will only deteriorate under military dictatorship, so we will fight as one, united, until the end". No wonder, then, that all the independent union federations

were banned at the end of February.

The size of the urban working class has grown in Myanmar since the country's opening up to foreign investment ten years ago, especially in the greater Yangon industrial region. Garment workers, mostly very young women, come from the countryside and, breaking with the patriarchal traditions in which they were brought up, have been organising and fighting for better working conditions and higher wages. Now, arrest warrants have been issued for twenty union leaders, including the IWFU's vice president, Soe Lay. Its president, Khang Zar, has issued an appeal to people around the world.

Through civil disobedience, protest and strikes, the people of Myanmar are speaking up clearly and loudly. We need the international community to do the same. We need you to stand by our side to make this coup collapse.

It is plain now that the generals will not be dislodged from power simply by repeated evidence that the population of Myanmar's cities hates them and rejects their dictatorship. After all, since 1962, the Tatmadaw has never relinquished real power to an elected civilian government. Its record is one of corruption, economic control and a never-ending war against the minority ethnicities, (Kachin, Karen, Kayin, Mon, Rohingya, etc) who make up 32 percent of the country's population but have long been oppressed by the Bamar majority.

Although it is clear that the resilience of the youthful protesters has changed nothing in the mindset of the generals, who live in their luxurious teak lined mansions with private golf courses in special zones far from the cities, there are signs of disaffection amongst the police. So far, they have borne the brunt of doing the Tatmadaw's dirty work. Some have refused orders to fire on unarmed protesters and fled to neighbouring India. In a joint statement to police in the Indian city of Mizoram, four officers stated:

"As the civil disobedience movement was gaining momentum and protests were held by anti-coup protesters at different places, we were instructed to shoot at the protesters. In such a scenario, we don't have the guts to shoot at our own people who are peaceful demonstrators."

Only if the working class can bring the economy to a stop and activists can undermine the morale of "the forces of order", only if the unnamed defenders can arm themselves, in short, only if the protests become a revolution and insurrection, can victory be assured. This is the key lesson of the Arab Spring ten years ago.

President Joe Biden has condemned the coup and the US has imposed limited sanctions on members of the military high command. Australia has condemned the use of lethal force or violence against civilians exercising their universal rights and suspended its "Defence Cooperation Program" with the Tatmadaw. The European Union's foreign policy High Representative, Josep Borrell, also condemned the "violent repression of peaceful protesters by the Myanmar military" and demanded "a return to democracy".

Yet, just last year, in April and November, Min Aung Hlaing was being fêted in Brussels by Nato chiefs. He also visited Germany, Austria and Italy, seeking to buy high-tech weaponry and armoured vehicles for his armed forces in their war against Myanmar's ethnic minorities. These links had continued despite the ethnic cleansing of 750,00 Rohingya in 2017, which the general had the gall to defend to Nato's top brass. In fact, the country's defence budget already amounts to more than the health and education budgets combined. But any hope that the western imperialist democracies will do anything decisive will be in vain.

Even less likely, is any word of opposition from the new imperialist kid on the block, "Communist China". Beijing is busy building its "Belt and Road" through Burma to reach major port facilities on the Indian Ocean. This route is of massive strategic importance to China because it would allow trade to avoid the

Malacca Straits, a potential "choke point" for the US and its allies.

Besides, a regime that slaughtered thousands of its own democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989, is presently committing cultural genocide against one million Uighurs and clamping down on democracy protesters in Hong Kong, is unlikely to aid, even verbally, such an uprising in Myanmar.

It is vital that socialists and trade unionists in Europe not only declare their solidarity with the young demonstrators and workers of Myanmar but force their governments to stop arming the Tatmadaw and feting its brutal generals. Trade unionists and socialists around the world need to respond quickly by blocking goods from, or destined for, Myanmar. Countries in that supply arms to the Myanmar military must be pressured to stop at once. Indeed, all links with the illegitimate junta must be exposed and severed.

If the workers of Myanmar can strengthen the strikes into an all-out general strike, this could open splits in the army, particularly between the rank and file and the officer caste. It is the soldiers and police who have the weapons and even the most massive popular movement will always be defeated if it remains unarmed.

In the end, only by breaking the discipline of the soldiers, bringing them over to side of the people, will it be possible to turn mass protest into a revolution that will drive the murderers from power and bring them to justice for their crimes. To hasten this day, trade unions and socialist organisations around the world should urgently adopt practical steps to bring solidarity to the workers and youth of Myanmar.

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