

In the Face of Massacres, Workers in Myanmar Are Still Fighting the Coup

Wednesday 14 April 2021, by [MYINT Ma Moe Sandar](#), [HAACK Michael](#), [HLAING Nadi](#), [KYI Ko Ar](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2021).

Myanmar's coup government has slaughtered workers for launching general strikes against the junta — but workers have doubled down, calling for comprehensive sanctions against the military. We talked to two leaders of the strikes.

On March 14, Myanmar's largest industrial district — Hlaing Tharyar, a sprawling township on the outskirts of Yangon that is home to hundreds of factories and hundreds of thousands of factory workers — was attacked by the country's military. For nearly six weeks, workers there had launched a series of strikes and protests against the military junta that seized power on February 1. Using tactics usually reserved for invading armies, the military destroyed barricades and opened fire on crowds. As the carnage unfolded, thirty Chinese-owned factories were set ablaze. By day's end some forty workers lay dead and scores more were seriously injured.

In the following days, hundreds of thousands of workers [fled](#) back to their home villages, and for nearly a week production ground almost to a [halt](#). Some factories in Hlaing Tharyar township have resumed operations in recent days, but on a limited scale.

International cargo ships have largely [ceased](#) docking in Yangon, meaning that factories can't get the raw materials needed to run. Bank employees have been on strike for nearly two months, making payments nearly impossible, and truckers have engaged in waves of strikes that have made internal shipping difficult. Myanmar is likely to lose its preferential trade statuses with the European Union and United States. Commodity prices have already begun to soar, and the population of cash-dependent workers are likely to suffer immensely.

Yet despite the brutal crackdown and deepening hardship, the labor movement in Myanmar has doubled down, calling for comprehensive sanctions against the military regime. Some labor leaders have even fled to the hill areas that are controlled by ethnic militias in order to join the fight from there.

To get the latest on how all of this is unfolding on the ground, we spoke with Ma Moe Sandra Myint, head of the Federation on General Workers Myanmar, and Ko Ar Kyi, a day laborer at a factory in Hlaing Tharyar township, site of the most notorious [massacre](#) during the March 14 siege.

MH/NH | What was it like growing up under the military dictatorship?

MMSM | It was growing up with fear. They closed our eyes. They closed our ears and left us without any development. There was uncertainty in every part of our lives. There were not enough employment opportunities and no guarantees on your job. Only rich people could access good education. We all had been governed with fear and lived under threats of torture, murder, and abuse.

KAK | I was only a baby when the 1988 uprisings erupted in the country. I've been oppressed my whole life. The freedom I felt under the civilian government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is very different from the life I had under military rule. We used to organize workers' strikes under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's government, and there was rule of law. Right now, there is none. We can't openly criticize the military without getting shot or arrested.

MH/NH | Describe what it was like to be in Hlaing Tharyar as the military laid siege to it. What sparked this crackdown?

MMSM | On the morning of that day, I was in a meeting with union leaders, and we were very close to the place where the confrontations happened. The Tatmadaw [armed forces] started the crackdown after 12 PM. They used tear gas, sound bombs, and then real bullets. Many people were killed.

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The military targeted Hlaing Tharyar's sit-in strikes because they were really strong in the fight for democracy, and many workers were participating. It was because of huge protests in Hlaing Tharyar that the military announced martial law there. They were afraid of the workers' power.

After the martial law announcement, workers changed their strategy from strikes with thousands of workers on the roads to protests based at townships or wards, and to preparing defense systems.

KAK | The protest was strong that day, with about a thousand to two thousand people participating. The military and the protesters were stationed behind their own barricades.

Between 11:30 and 12 PM, when the temperatures got really hot, some donor groups came out to the streets to give the protesters food and water. Children from the neighborhood came out to get food for themselves and their families. That's when the soldiers started shooting into the crowds.

Earlier that day, around 9 or 10 AM, the soldiers blocked off the three bridges going into Hlaing Tharyar. From there, they had a good view of the crowds. Shots came from the bridges and the streets. Protesters started shouting that there were snipers stationed on the bridge. Luckily, I had my bike, so I took off. I saw a twelve- or thirteen-year-old kid get shot in the forehead and fall to the ground right in front of me.

Over two hundred died in my township alone. There were dead bodies scattered everywhere. The military would shoot at those who attempted to pick up the bodies.

Street fighters from Hlaing Tharyar also came out that day and fought back against the military. They fought with knives and machetes. But in a battle between knives and guns, those with guns win.

Those who started the fire on March 14 were dressed in civilian clothing. We suspect that they were *lu mite* (thugs), who are paid by the military to wreak havoc. These *lu mite* came to a Chinese-owned garment factory. In front of the factory there was a large pile of rejected garments. They set fire to it. Since the factories in Hlaing Tharyar are so densely packed, the fire took off and burned through other adjacent factories. I think five to eight factories were burnt to the ground that day.

The same arsonists burned Chinese-factory owned cars. To this day, you can still see the burned cars on the streets. No one has been able to remove them.

I don't think it was the protesters who set fire to the factories. We were in a completely different part of Hlaing Tharyar.

MH/NH | How has the situation on the ground changed in the past few weeks?

KAK | Some factories have reopened, and some workers have returned to work. After the fires burned down factories in Hlaing Tharyar, the companies only waited three days for the workers to return. Those who didn't were fired or not allowed back. Some also didn't return because they were afraid.

There's no security at home or on the streets. There are *dalans* (informants) everywhere. I've seen posters around Hlaing Tharyar that say, "If you are a *dalan*, we bear no responsibility for your life." I don't know who put them up, but they are posted all over the place. People are fed up, but also afraid of these *dalans*.

In recent days, there's been reports of soldiers robbing civilians in broad daylight. If they spot you on the streets, they will stop you and ask you to hand over your smartphone and your wallet at gunpoint. I heard from a friend whose brother is a soldier stationed in Yangon that the soldiers have not been paid for three to four months now. He said that's why the soldiers are robbing people.

There are other kinds of robberies going on as well. On the last day of every month, the workers get paid in cash, and it's become the most dangerous day of the month. Workers are getting robbed on their way home. I saw with my own eyes a female worker whose purse was snatched by a man on a motorcycle.

Many people are having a difficult time finding jobs because everything is shut down these days. It's hard to commute downtown from Hlaing Tharyar because public buses run very infrequently due to roadblocks from the crackdown and the protests. The infrequent public transportation makes it hard for us to find jobs downtown. We are forced to look for jobs within the industrial zone.

MH/NH | How has the military government's decision to place the industrial townships under martial law changed workers' strategy toward fighting the coup?

KAK | Before March 14, people built barricades in Hlaing Tharyar with sandbags and cement-filled barrels. Our civilian night watch teams also patrolled the streets at night. Hlaing Tharyar is a working-class township with a lot of street fighters who have a do or die mentality. The soldiers didn't dare come into our streets because of the presence of street fighters. The soldiers would only patrol the main street in Hlaing Tharyar.

After the March 14 siege and the blood bath, the soldiers removed all the barricades. They came in with bulldozers to remove the barrels and forced civilians who have been arrested as porters to get rid of the sandbags. They've also occupied a soccer field in Hlaing Tharyar.

"We also have to register family members with the authorities every week, including children under five years old. This is how the military is arresting protesters."

We are still under martial law. No one is allowed on the streets between 6 PM and 6 AM. You will get shot or arrested if you go out during those hours. The military patrols our streets every night. If they see a light, they will shoot. When we hear the military trucks and the gunshots, we switch off our lights and sit in the dark.

We also have to register family members with the authorities every week, including children under five years old. This is how the military is arresting protesters. If they find someone who doesn't

belong in the household registration list, they will take you and the person away. Oftentimes, we don't know where they are taken and what happens to them.

MH/NH | You recently had a conversation with Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader of the British Labor Party. What did you talk to him about?

MMSM | I talked about the military's brutal oppression of peaceful protesters and workers. I requested help from him for every person who is experiencing difficulties and hardship due to military oppression and the coup.

MH/NH | What do you plan to do next?

KAK | I will continue working at the factory to support my family. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. The military is patrolling everywhere and surveilling everyone. They are monitoring who enters and leaves the cities. If you don't have proper paperwork, you are sure to get arrested on the road.

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Last Saturday, I was stopped at gunpoint while I was walking home from work. They asked me what I was doing on the street. I told them I was walking home from work. Then they told me to load some things into their military trucks. I had to oblige.

These days, men don't dare go out because of the risk of being used as porters. The military and the police are asking for ransom money for those who are detained. They won't let you go unless your family pays them around twenty dollars. This is the price for porters. There's a different price for different levels of detention.

Right now, we are looking at Thingyan [Myanmar's annual water festival]. The military is saying that people will celebrate the usual way. I know for a fact that it won't happen. I work in a plastic factory that produces plastic buckets and water guns that people use during Thingyan. So far, our factory has received zero orders for these things, which makes me believe that Thingyan will be different this year.

MH/NH | What is your dream for Myanmar and your children?

KAK | My dream is for Myanmar to be free from military rule. I wish for the immediate release of those who have been detained and imprisoned, including our elected leaders. I want to see a return to democracy and a return to normalcy.

MMSM | Workers were always neglected and forgotten under every government in Myanmar. [Even during the partially democratic period] workers never received their full rights. After we are successful in this revolution, I want to have guarantees for workers' rights and workers' benefits.

What is happening now in Myanmar is a fight between justice and injustice, truthfulness and untruthfulness.

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