

“My Goal for 2022 Is to See the Return of Democracy in Myanmar”

Thursday 3 February 2022, by [MYINT Ma Moe Sandar](#), [HAACK Michael](#), [HLAING Nadi](#), [HTWAY Ma Yin Yin](#), [YEE Ma San](#), [YI Ma Wut](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2022).

One year ago today, Myanmar’s military generals seized power in a bloody coup that wiped out workers’ rights. We spoke with a union leader and three garment workers, who for months launched general strikes against the coup.

One year ago today, *Jacobin* was finalizing an [interview](#) with Ma Moe Sandar Myint, president of the Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM), when news of a military coup broke. Almost immediately, we heard that garment workers were planning to use their organizing skills to stage nationwide strikes against the military takeover.

Over the subsequent weeks, garment workers played a central role in labor actions that shut down huge swaths of the country’s economy. [Doctors](#) and teachers, the majority of whom are government employees, went out on strike with the garment workers. [Railway](#) workers and other civil servants soon followed, joined by private sector [bank workers](#).

The anti-coup resistance initially sought to restore the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, which in 2010 entered a power-sharing agreement with the military generals that had long ruled the country. Over time, protesters’ demands became more radical, including scrapping the 2008 constitution, which gave the military control over key ministries and guaranteed them 25 percent of the seats in parliament.

For a decade, the NLD had paired liberal economic reforms with political and labor rights, allowing the garment industry to balloon and the union movement to build a rank-and-file base. Though internationally disgraced for her callous apology for the Rohingya genocide, Aung San Suu Kyi — now again in detention — remained popular in the country for her role in the partial opening.

But what started as [carnival-like](#) street demonstrations against the coup gave way to violence and bloodshed as the military moved in to murder protesters — and protesters, in turn, built barricades and [fought back](#) with slingshots and homemade air rifles. To date, around 1,500 protesters have been killed, hundreds of thousands been forced to flee, and over 11,500 have been [arrested](#). Though people continue to resist through “[flash protests](#)” and “silent protests,” the streets have largely been cleared of protesters since midsummer.

Dreams shattered by the coup, disillusioned with nonviolence, many young people left home to join the [People’s Defense Force](#), an armed wing of the opposition’s National Unity Government (NUG). The group has become a deadly force for the military to reckon with. Using makeshift bombs and other guerilla tactics, it has made [impressive](#) gains and taken a huge toll on the military’s [morale](#), spurring higher defection rates.

Meanwhile, the garment sector has slowly crept back to life even as union activists, including Ma Moe Sandra Myint, have called for international brands to boycott Myanmar.

The lives of garment workers — difficult before the coup — have become barely tenable. Last year, the industrial zones that house the majority of garment factories turned into [war zones](#) as workers clashed with military forces. Indiscriminate killings and incarcerations proliferated. Hundreds more disappeared at the hands of the military. Industrial zones are now under martial law, and soldiers regularly extort money from workers at checkpoints and verbally and sexually [assault](#) them. To make ends meet since the coup, many garment workers have accrued heavy debts with limited prospects of paying them back, and lines for visa applications to work abroad have increased dramatically.

On the eve of the coup's one-year anniversary, we spoke again to Ma Moe Sandar Myint, who is currently in hiding, as well as three garment workers in Yangon: Ma Yin Yin Htway, Ma Wut Yi, and Ma San Yee (all pseudonyms to protect them from retaliation).

MH/NH | How has the resistance movement progressed?

MSY | We haven't seen the same level of political activity that we saw a year ago, but it doesn't mean that people have stopped protesting the military. We still participate in our own way every day. For instance, workers at my factory don't report to work on silent protest days [days when cities go quiet in demonstration against the military junta]. There are about 3,000 to 4,000 workers at my factory alone.

“This time, it's different. We want to root out the dictatorship.”

Our factory managers don't cause any trouble for us. They know why we protest, and I think they secretly support us. In fact, last year at the peak of the street protests, our factory workforce, including the managers, walked out in the thousands and organized protests in the streets for fifteen days straight. We rented buses and cars to transport the protesters and paid them out of our pockets.

Coups are not new to us. I was still very young when the ['88 uprising](#) happened [against the coup that year]. I remember protesting in the streets with my mom, but the protests lasted only for days. This time around, the people haven't stopped protesting for a year now.

MMSM | This time, it's different. We want to root out the dictatorship. We need to go through a hard time to get to that point. It might take us a while to get there, but we all need to be patient and steadily move forward. When I get down, I remind myself why I'm fighting.

MH/NH | How have working conditions changed since the coup?

MMSM | During the NLD period, workers' lives were difficult. But now, it's worse. Under the NLD, even though there wasn't full protection, we had the right to voice dissent, and we had the right to form unions. We had the space to voice what we wanted, even though we didn't always get our demands.

Now we are an underground union. There are no legal unions right now in Burma.

Oppression from employers continues. Workers are without protection. I myself am on the run.

Workers are enduring verbal abuse. Workers are enduring firings without benefits. Permanent workers have been downgraded to day laborers' work and have no other choice. Workers' conditions have been compromised all around.

MYYH | Even before the coup, the garment factories were hit hard by the pandemic. We went through a hard time making ends meet. And just as things were starting to return to normal, the

coup happened.

These days, some factories are cutting hours because they are not getting enough orders, while others are pushing workers to their limits with long hours, low wages, and no rest. A good number of factories are resuming operations. So, there are jobs available, but are they good and desirable? No, they are not.

The factories are located in [the industrial zone of] Hlaing Tharyar, which has been under martial law since March 2020. To get in and out, we have to go through checkpoints staffed by soldiers. They extort money to allow us through the gates. In the early days of the coup, they would even search our phones.

Since the coup, I've had to hop from factory to factory. As a daily wage laborer, I make a scant salary of 4,800 Myanmar kyat (equivalent to \$2.70) per day. It's not enough to get by. Commodity prices and rents have risen. On top of that, we now have to pay additional taxes on things we didn't before. For instance, when we buy new SIM cards for our phones, we have to pay a tax on them.

MWY | My factory is located in Shwe Pyi Thar and is owned by someone in the military. The manager is also from the military. They make us work long hours but don't compensate us for the overtime. They tell us, "If you don't want to work here, you can leave anytime." Since the job market isn't good, we have to endure whatever they make us do.

"The factory manager would terrorize us by saying, 'If I tell the soldiers what you guys are doing, do you know what could happen to you?'"

At the beginning of the protests last year, the factory manager warned us not to join the protesters. He would terrorize us by saying, "If I tell the soldiers what you guys are doing [politically], do you know what could happen to you?" They only care about their business.

Even at the height of the violence, the factory owner and the manager kept the factory open and told the workers that everything was fine and that it was safe for them to report to work. They spread propaganda within the factory by telling us that the country was running well and was in better hands.

MSY | I consider myself lucky, because my factory has stayed open throughout the coup and there haven't been any cuts to our wages. We've all managed to keep our jobs so far. The biggest change is there's no overtime. No overtime means reduced salaries but not a reduced workload. In fact, the workload has increased because we have to rush to meet the demands within regular work hours.

Compared to other factories, the workers at my factory have a good relationship with the managers, who give us some freedom to voice our concerns.

In some ways, no overtime is good because it's not safe for female garment workers to stay late in the factories and commute back home in the dark. Hlaing Tharyar and Shwe Pyi Thar are still under martial law, which means we have strict curfews and checkpoints manned by soldiers. The managers know that it's not safe for us to work late because of the political situation and the martial law, and they know they'd be responsible if something bad were to happen to us. So, that's part of the reason why there's been no overtime.

MH | How has your daily life changed since the coup?

MYYH | I was a permanent worker before the coup. Life was good then. I was able to support not only myself but also my mom and my two sisters back home. I came to Yangon five years ago to find

a good job and to support my family. I was also trying to better myself by going back to school, and my salary was enough to afford the university fees. COVID-19 hit toward the end of my first year at the university, and since then I haven't managed to return to school. I don't know when I'll be able to study again.

I have a younger sister who's twenty years old staying with me in Yangon. She arrived in Yangon to work in the factory just as the pandemic struck, and it's been hard for both of us to survive while supporting my mother and my other sister back home.

MSY | I have three children who are currently not going to school. First, COVID-19 happened, and schools were closed. Then, the coup happened, and the schools remained closed. Now it's not safe to send my children to school, so we keep them at home. We try to tutor them and provide them with books as much as we can, but my husband and I are often busy with our own work. My husband lost his job at the garment factory during the COVID-19 pandemic because his factory closed permanently. Now he finds jobs here and there.

Before the coup, both my husband and I were able to make a good living, send our children to schools, and save money for our retirement. Now, we have to make ends meet with a lower income and rising commodity prices. We have to eat into our savings to get by. Internet usage fees have increased. The military is arresting anyone with VPN services, so it's not safe for us to use it anymore and we have to delete them from our phones.

MH/NH | Do you have any thoughts about the calls for boycotts against companies doing business in Myanmar and for sanctions against the military regime?

MYYH | I see it from both sides. On the one hand, it's good that some companies have chosen to leave instead of continuing to do business with the military. On the other hand, it doesn't help the workers, many of whom have been out of a job. If the factories close and I have no job prospects in Yangon, my only option is to go back home and work in the fields. It'll be hard to continue supporting my family. Without a job, I can't stay in Yangon.

MMSM | We are fully aware of how economic sanctions on Myanmar can hurt the workers, but we have to let ourselves bleed to kill the parasite [the military]. When we finally agreed to call for comprehensive economic sanctions, we knew about the risks and benefits. We organized webinars with the workers to communicate to them openly and honestly about the challenges and nuances of comprehensive economic sanctions. Most workers who attended these webinars understood and wanted to get behind our calls for sanctions.

We accept that there are varying opinions about comprehensive economic sanctions among workers. I also think that the workers who may disagree with us on comprehensive economic sanctions may not be fully aware of the reasons behind our action.

MSY | I would say the companies leaving Myanmar will hurt the workers.

MH/NH | What does the future of Myanmar look like to you?

MYYH | Deteriorating working conditions, rampant unemployment, rising commodity prices, and financial difficulties will make our lives more difficult. Some are forced into jobs they don't want to do. There will be an increase in criminal activities and lawlessness. I worry about safety. As a woman, I don't dare to be on the streets after dark. I stay in because I know it's not safe out there for me.

I would like to see more assistance for the workers. I would like the international community to not

forget about us and to do something to address the injustices we are experiencing.

MMSM | As workers, we know we cannot wait for change to come. We have to fight for what we want. We have always been fighting for our rights.

In Myanmar, the workers are poor and not very high in societal status. Historically, our contributions have been overlooked. But when you look at the history of the resistance movement in the country, you'll notice that workers have been the strongest force. We have been at the forefront of every resistance movement. We want to say to the NUG officials, "Once the country restores peace and democracy, don't forget about the sacrifices and contributions the workers have made. Don't leave us behind."

We are tired of the international community's toothless statements and inaction towards the situation in Myanmar. Instead, we want to see action. My goal for 2022 is to see the return of democracy in my country. I will do everything I can to achieve that goal.

Ma Moe Sandar Myint is an organizer with the Federation of General Workers Myanmar.

Ma Yin Yin Htway is a twenty-five-year-old garment factory worker.

Ma Wut Yi is a twenty-three-year-old garment factory worker.

Ma San Yee is a forty-two-year-old garment factory worker.

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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