

Interview

“Fight on Our Own and Build Solidarity”: A Conversation with Ma Tin Tin Wai of Federation of General Workers in Myanmar

Thursday 2 February 2023, by [Ma Cheria](#), [Ma Tin Tin Wai](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2023).

Interviewer’s Note:

Myanmar started its broad-ranging political and economic liberalisation process when the quasi-civilian government came to power in 2011, calling for the expansion of foreign direct investment and international trade. The nature of Myanmar’s workforce also shifted from agricultural and subsistence labour to wage labour in the manufacturing sector in the cities.

A majority of the urban workforce, including a large number of women, is employed in the garment sector that contributes significantly to the country’s national income. Along with economic liberalisation, labour market formalisation was undertaken to enforce legal labour protections, maintain the integrity of the investments and provide stable work environments required for uninterrupted production. [1]

A new Labour Organization Law was enacted in 2011. It significantly changed the nature of labour relations and the labour market, ushering in new social security systems, mandatory employment contracts, minimum wage, and labour dispute resolution mechanisms. However, those policies failed to adequately protect workers’ rights. The state remained committed to protecting the interests of employers as their interests were aligned.

Workers, oppressed and invisible throughout the different governments, launched an anti-coup movement when the military staged a coup in 2021. Even under the present military regime that relentlessly cracks down on strikes, sentences to death pro-democracy supporters, and restricts freedom of speech and labour activism, we can still see spontaneous outbreaks of protests organised by workers in their factories.

The Federation of General Workers in Myanmar (FGWM, formerly known as the Federation of Garment Workers) with 20 factory-level trade unions is at the forefront of the resistance against the junta, and organising against the capitalist exploitation of workers in Myanmar. It has been supporting people from the Civil Disobedience Movement to form unions. For these reasons, their leaders have been targeted by the military junta and driven into exile.

As we mark two years since the 2021 coup in Myanmar, ALR’s contributing writer, Ma Cheria, spoke with Ma Tin Tin Wai, the co-president of the FGWM. The interview provides FGWM’s perspective on the conditions under which workers organise and union movements operate in post-coup Myanmar.

ALR: What is the role and involvement of workers in the pro-democracy movement?

FGWM: When the military staged a coup, union organisers realised they should resist the coup and dictatorship. It was a natural decision since they had been making a conscious effort to liberate

themselves from oppression even before the coup.

After making a collective decision to fight the military dictatorship in solidarity, from 2-4 February they conducted a series of discussions on how to resist the coup. On 5 February, over 12,000 workers from 10 factories organised strikes, wearing red ribbons and identical T-shirts and shouting slogans in their workplace. Later on 6 February, more than 4,000 factory workers organised a rally in Yangon from Parami Sein Gay Har Shopping Mall to Hledan, a landmark event during this Spring Revolution.

Currently, FGWM is working as a member of the Labor Alliance, a representative of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), and also a committee member of the Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) formed by the NUCC. Moreover, FGWM has been working together with 200 other pro-democracy groups in exile or inside the country, demanding Comprehensive Economic Sanctions (CES).

ALR: Even before the military coup, workers' rights were being violated. For example, they could not enjoy their right to a minimum wage or the right to strike. How did the coup affect workers differently?

FGWM: Since the military seized power, some union leaders and worker organisers got arrested, and some had warrants out for their arrest. Although labour policies and regulations were in place even before the coup, they failed to protect workers' rights. The situation worsened after the coup. Workers face exploitation, long working hours and forced labour.

In the post-coup situation, the military took control of the garment sector. Unquestionably, the sector has been enjoying big profits under the non-tariff policy and Everything But Arms (EBA) agreement.

It is also the source of kickbacks to the military. Nevertheless, workers still live in precarious conditions as they do not earn minimum wage. It is difficult for them to find jobs, and they are being exploited by employers.

ALR: According to local news, strikes are still happening in the factories. How is it possible despite the restrictions on labour activism and the threat of the military junta?

FGWM: The military has arrested worker organisers and leaders by raiding their houses. In April 2021, the military arrested workers in their factories while they were organising a strike. In the case of the SIOEN factory strike in August 2021, some worker organisers got arrested.

Sometimes, the factory owners or managers call the police or the military to repress workers at the workplace. Such repression of striking workers is common. The same thing happened to the striking workers in the Rui-Ning factory on 22 April 2021.

Nevertheless, workers are still courageously trying to oppose workplace oppression and demand their rights.

ALR: Did workers receive support from the labour unions or the federations?

FGWM: After the military threatened workers not to contact FGWM, they contacted us secretly.

As a federation, we have been helping our workers as they requested by giving advice and encouragement and sharing the organising strategies and experiences of other factory strikes. We have to fight on our own and build solidarity in order to secure our rights.

ALR: The local news also reported that the employers negotiated with the striking workers. Did the employers meet workers' demands?

FGWM: In the case of workplace strikes that happened in three factories during July and December 2021, the employers called the police and military to make negotiations.

If we can show solidarity, for instance, if all the workers in a particular factory join the workplace strike, we can achieve what we demand to a certain extent. We can learn that from the experiences of the previous workplace strikes I mentioned earlier. So, demanding our rights in solidarity is the key.

ALR: Is there any intervention from the police? How is it different compared to the pre-coup period?

FGWM: Yes, in the case of the SIOEN factory strike, the factory owners called the police and paid them for their involvement in the negotiation. The factory owner was trying to intimidate the workers by using the power of the military.

After the coup, there were proven cases of workplace raids and physical assaults committed on striking workers. The worker organiser, who was arrested during the SIOEN factory strike, was injured during the brutal crackdown and subsequent interrogation at the police station.

ALR: Local news suggests that employers targeted and dismissed the workers who are 5/8/9 National Registration Card (NRC) holders from the Sagaing/Magway and Mandalay regions, places that are prone to armed conflicts between the local people's defence forces and the State Administration Council (SAC). Did the workers get their jobs back?

FGWM: In Myanmar, most garment factories are owned by Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Thai investors. The factory owners targeted and dismissed workers who are 5/8/9 NRC holders from the Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay regions.

According to the factory managers, they followed orders from the military and dismissed these workers. It was an action taken by the labour ministry assigned by the SAC. In August, there were 200 workers from four factories who got dismissed and lost their jobs.

Workers were threatened and intimidated. They were forced to leave their jobs voluntarily, so they didn't get any compensation. In addition, it's challenging for these workers to work as migrant workers outside their regions since their freedom of movement is restricted. They are also asked for money at the travel checkpoints due to their NRC.

ALR: In terms of union registration status, what is happening now?

FGWM: Right after the military coup, the labour unionists in five factories were informed that their registration cards were ready. Nevertheless, they refused to collect the registration cards because they didn't recognise the ministry under the military junta as a legitimate authority.

The labour unionists also decided not to work with such government ministries or organisations. They would not register or extend their registration status under the rule of the SAC.

On the other hand, factory owners urged unionists to register and said that they wouldn't negotiate with unregistered unions. Sometimes, officers from the junta's labour department come to the workplace to check the registration status.

ALR: What is the union's political strategy in post-coup Myanmar?

FGWM: Currently, we are calling for CES against the country. In doing so, we are working together with other pro-democracy forces, which include 200 groups of students' unions, workers' unions, teachers' unions, LGBTIQ groups, women's groups, monk groups, and so on.

We are calling for the international community to isolate the military regime. Some groups are calling for a Blood Money Campaign [to freeze all payments from international companies to the SAC]. The goal of CES is to cut the revenue and currency that go to the military and help it commit crimes against humanity in our country.

ALR: Is there any attempt by the Junta to tighten its control over labour unions and reform labour regulations in favour of capital?

FGWM: Thus far, we don't see any changes made by the SAC to laws and regulations. They still haven't changed the minimum wage law yet, which was to be reviewed in 2020.

In any case, employers are trying to oppress labour activism and violate labour rights by taking advantage of the current political turmoil and supporting the military dictatorship.

ALR: How does the union movement see the armed struggle?

FGWM: Alongside non-violent general and flash mob strikes, calling for international support and boycotts to military products, taken as necessary, the armed struggle also plays a crucial role in overthrowing the SAC.

ALR: What international pressure, if any, is helpful at this moment for the union and broader democracy movement?

FGWM: While some international communities try to put pressure on the SAC to support the pro-democracy movement, some countries are blindfolded and still regard the military coup as an internal affair.

We want to urge and encourage the international community to join the CES to stop funding the SAC, which has been committing massacres and crimes against humanity in Myanmar.

By Ma Cheria

P.S.

- Asian Labour Review a journal for labour movements across Asia. January 31, 2023 11:32 pm: <https://labourreview.org/fight-on-our-own/>
 - Ma Cheria is a contributing writer at the Asian Labour Review. She is a MA student of Public Policy at Chiang Mai University. She is interested in labour issues with a special focus on labour policies and labour rights.
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Footnotes

[1] Campbell, S. (2018), "Labour Formalisation as Selective Hegemony in Reform-era Myanmar".
The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology.