

Thailand: On the Mae Sot Borderland

Wednesday 24 May 2023, by [CAMPBELL Stephen](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2023).

For several decades, the town of Mae Sot along the Myanmar border in northwest Thailand has been the primary entry point for Myanmar migrants arriving in the country.

Mae Sot is a major production site for Thailand's garment sector, which employs primarily Myanmar migrants in several hundred local factories. These range from large, registered factories employing several thousand individuals to unregistered "home factories" employing less than a dozen people.

Myanmar migrants are also extensively employed as agricultural laborers in the surrounding countryside and as service workers in Mae Sot town proper. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were, in Mae Sot and its neighboring districts, between 150,000 and 300,000 migrant workers. About forty percent worked in industry, another forty percent in agriculture, and twenty percent in domestic work and services.

Mae Sot-based factory workers are overwhelmingly women in their late teens and early twenties and hail mostly from lower Myanmar—specifically, Bago, Yangon, Ayeyarwady regions, and Mon and Rakhine states. [1]

The Covid-19 pandemic and the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar significantly impacted migration from Myanmar and conditions for Myanmar migrants in Thailand. With the pandemic's decline, the Mae Sot border was re-opened for official passage in January 2023. Yet, undocumented cross-border travel remains a preferred option for many migrants for reasons discussed below.

To better understand the coup's impact on Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, I interviewed U Moe Kyaw Sein, Joint General Secretary of the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association (YCOWA), a Mae Sot-based Myanmar-run migrant worker organization.

Since its founding in 1999, YCOWA has been a critical local force supporting workplace organizing and other struggles by Myanmar migrants on the border. The following is an abridged translation (from Burmese) of the interview I conducted in April 2023.

Stephen Campbell (SC): How has the military coup in Myanmar impacted migrant workers?

U Moe Kyaw Sein (UMKS): Within Myanmar, in the industrial zones, many employers closed their factories or reduced their workforces. So, there was a decline in jobs. Workers returned to their villages in Upper Myanmar or in Ayeyarwady Region. These workers were enduring a lot of difficulties: their livelihoods and the military.

As a result, many people in Myanmar left as migrant workers to other countries. Some workers came [to Thailand] under the MoU, a visa system arranged under an agreement between [Thailand and Myanmar]. Some workers were already living here [in Thailand] under the 'pink card' permit or the Section 64 [seasonal worker] permit.

The families [in Myanmar] whom these workers supported with their wages had a lot of difficulties [after the coup]. At that time, the situation in Thailand was also impacted. Due to Covid, developed countries were seeing unemployment. So they didn't place orders. As a result, many factories [in Thailand] could not provide work.

This was already the situation when the military seized power in Myanmar. After the military seized power, it caused more social and economic problems for migrant workers' families. So, Myanmar migrants who arrived in Thailand were facing difficulties [on multiple fronts].

SC: Since the coup, have more migrant workers been coming to Thailand?

UMKS: After the military seized power in Myanmar, workers left for various reasons and came to the border in Thailand or went to other countries. We met last month in Mae Sot with all the organizations involved in migrant affairs on the Thai border.

[In that meeting], it was announced that an additional 50,000 migrant workers have arrived in Mae Sot. In other [neighboring] districts, like Phop Phra and Mae Ramat, there has also been an increase in the migrant population.

SC: Has the increased migrant population on the border since the coup impacted migrant worker wages?

UMKS: In the agricultural sector, previously, the owner of an agricultural field would hire, for example, ten workers and pay them 150 baht (or 4.40 USD) per day for a standard eight hours of work. And they'd work for ten days [to finish some work].

Now that many more people have come, the owner can hire enough workers to finish the work in three days while only paying each worker 120 baht (or 3.50 USD) per day. The reason is that, in the past, the owner could only get ten workers. Now, the owner can get 20 or 25 workers. Work that would previously take four, six, or seven days can now be completed in three days.

According to Thai law, factory workers in Mae Sot must be paid a minimum of 332 baht (or 9.70 USD) for eight hours of work. However, in most factories, most workers do not get that amount. Some people get 150 baht. Some people get 250 baht.

There are very few factories where workers get the legally stipulated minimum wage. And when the factory is hiring, a worker must pay [a bribe] to the manager or supervisor to get a job. This happened in the past. But now it's happening more.

SC: Due to the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, have migrant workers had to send back more remittances?

UMKS: During the current Spring Revolution [post-coup democracy struggle] period, because the situation has deteriorated, migrant workers, whether they have a job or not, have been trying to send back as much as possible to their hometowns.

Thailand is the primary source of remittances to Myanmar. Migrant workers help by sending money or by sending items. In this way, they support both their families and the revolution.

SC: What are the main difficulties for Myanmar migrant workers along the border?

UMKS: Along the border, the cost of a permit for Myanmar workers to work legally has increased. Employers cannot do this process themselves, so they hire brokers to do it for them. But now there

are many [migrant workers] who can't afford the cost of registering for a legal permit.

The reason is that there are many steps. For example, say I will do a work permit—a 'pink card.' I have to do a blood test, and I have to go to the hospital. And there's the social security process and whatnot. Even skilled workers who go to the labor office don't understand the process.

So, how can workers submit their applications? They need to get a broker to submit it for them. The broker's fee is 13,000 baht (or 380 USD) or at least 12,000 baht to arrange a 'pink card.' [Many migrant workers] can't afford to pay 12,000 baht.

Another difficulty is that the number of Myanmar migrant workers on the border has increased, but there aren't enough jobs in factories or construction. This is a big challenge that workers are facing.

So, many migrants are trying to get to other places [in Thailand] where there are jobs and wages are better. From Mae Sot to Bangkok, the going rate is between 15,000 and 20,000 baht. That's the fee for smuggling someone without documentation. That's the cost if you're going from Mae Sot. It's even more expensive if you're going from Myanmar.

SC: Now that the Mae Sot border crossing is open, are migrants still coming to Thailand without documents through the underground route? Why?

UMKS: The military junta re-opened the [Thai-Myanmar Friendship] bridge [in January 2023]. When they [Myanmar border authorities] see a young person, they search them. And if they see a photo of the three-finger [revolutionary] salute or something like that [on the person's phone], they arrest them.

Before Thingyan [in mid-April], they arrested around 200 young people for this reason. They were just migrant workers. Because people are scared [of being arrested], they cross by the underground route [without documentation]. And when they return, they cross back over by the underground route.

SC: In the coming years, do you expect an increase in Myanmar migrants coming to Thailand?

UMKS: Since the military seized power, it has burned villages and carried out attacks. If the situation continues like this in the coming years, people will not be able to work. I think to meet their basic needs, more people will leave the country. If the political situation changes, it could be different. But if it continues like this in our country, more people will leave.

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P.S.

Asian Labour Review

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Footnotes

[1] Campbell, S. (2018) *Border Capitalism, Disrupted: Precarity and Struggle in a Southeast Asian Industrial Zone*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p.27-29.