Burma: Asian left parties condemn attacks on workers' rights

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September 16, 2010 — We, the undersigned organisations, strongly condemn the military junta of Burma for its new decree to curb workers' right to form trade unions and its harsh punishments against any industrial action.

The military junta of Burma — the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) — decreed a new regulation on August 20, 2010, at a meeting in Rangoon attended by industry employers, government ministers and Burmese military officials, including Lt-Gen Myint Swe of the ministry of defence. It stated that, whoever launches or participates in industrial protests demanding better rights or conditions will be fired and blacklisted. The reason for the decree, labour activists in Burma believe, is that the junta wants to prevent further industrial action and employers don't want their workers taking action to demand better wages, so now they can fire those who protest and stop them from getting jobs elsewhere.

In March, workers at industries such as Shwe Pyi Thar, Taung Dagon and Hlaing Thayar launched protests demanding that employers give them time off during public holidays and increase their salaries and payments for working overtime. An industrial worker in Burma earns about 20,000 kyat to 40,000 kyat (US$20-40) monthly. Many have to work overtime to augment their insufficient income.

Historically, labour movements have played a major role in the Burma people's struggles against colonialism and fascist military dictatorships. Burma has experienced two major uprisings in its history in which the workers played the leading role, together with students and the general public. These were the "1300 [Burmese calendar] anti-colonial uprising" and the student-led "8888″ pro-democracy demonstrations. The 1300 anti-colonial uprising took place from 1938 to 1939 and was kindled by a labour strike staged by workers from the Chauk petroleum refinery, owned by British Oil Company (BOC). The "1300 uprising" awakened strong patriotic and nationalist sentiments throughout the whole country and paved the way for a countrywide anti-colonial independence movement.

Following the military coup in 1962 led by General Ne Win, democracy, human rights and freedom to form independent labour unions was effectively suppressed; education, health and other socioeconomic determinants deteriorated significantly as well. Under General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council, and later the Burma Socialist Program Party, workers in faced various forms of oppression and exploitation, including low pay, poor living conditions and lack of personal security.

In June 1974, railway workers in Burma staged a strike that later culminated in a nationwide workers' strike. The strike bought all government administration and the operation of public works to a virtual standstill. The workers demanded higher salaries, lowering of basic commodity prices, freedom to form an independent labour union, and some fringe benefits for their families. The government rejected their demands, and the workers' strike was effectively crushed. Many workers were gunned down inside the factories and on the streets; others were arrested and sentenced to

long-term imprisonment, fired from their jobs, transferred to other towns and cities, or were forced into early retirement.

During the 1988 nationwide demonstrations, many government workers joined the students in in the streets of Rangoon and other cities to call for democracy and human rights. The demonstrations quickly gained momentum and ultimately became the largest uprising in the history of modern Burma.

The one-party system government of General Ne Win faced a serious political crisis and, again, government administration came to a virtual standstill as a general strike took hold. During the demonstrations, a myriad independent organisations, including labour unions, emerged throughout the country. Following the September 18, 1988, military coup, however, all independent organisations and unions were banned. Many of the workers who participated in the demonstrations were given long prison sentences, were dismissed from their jobs or transferred to other locations, or were forced into early retirement.

Despite the several attempts made by labour rights activists and lawyers to register independent labour unions, the regime has always turned down the applications. On June 23, 2010, the Burmese regime again rejected an application to form a “Burma National Labor Union”. In the absence of independent labour unions and other channels, such as a free press, to express their grievances, workers in Burma remain exploited by both foreign and local factory owners and they have no means to demand the absence of all workers’ rights, adequate pay, proper working conditions and personal security.

Therefore, we the undersigned organisations and political parties declare our solidarity with the struggle of Burma’s working class, and hereby demand that:

1. The new regulation to prevent the labour rights be abolished.

2. Any form of repression of workers by factory owners or government agencies be rejected.

3. Full democratic rights for workers, including the right to organise, build independent trade unions and to form political parties.

We declare our full support to the people of Burma to build a democratic Burma, because only a democratic Burma can prosperity and justice be achieved.

Workers of the world unite!

[This statement is initiated by Working People Association (Indonesia) and Network of Progressive Youth Burma. If your organisation would like to sign, please email international prp-indonesia.org.]

Signed by

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Network of Progressive Youth Burma
Confederation Congress of Indonesia Union Alliance
All Nepal Federation of Trade Unions
Socialist Party of Malaysia
Socialist Alliance, Australia
Socialist Alternative, Australia