

“Until the end of the world”: Myanmar’s unfinished revolution

Thursday 9 June 2022, by [NARAI Robert](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2022).

History is written with our blood

Revolution!

Those who lost their lives in the fight for democracy

Our country is a land built with martyrs

We will not be satisfied until the end of the world

- “Kabar Ma Kyay Bu” (“Until the end of the world”) [\[1\]](#)

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This article is a preliminary account of an unfinished revolution. It is an attempt to explore the implications of the great wave of strikes and demonstrations unleashed in response to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s coup and the consequences of the armed conflict that has engulfed large parts of the country. [\[2\]](#)

There are two senses in which this revolution remains unfinished: that the forces opposed to the junta are far from exhausted (although the path many are now heading down is a much different one from that which was opened up by the February uprising); and that the material concerns motivating the initial uprising cannot be solved unless the revolutionary process “grows over” into an assault on the entire Burmese ruling class. [\[3\]](#)

The social forces and aspirations unleashed in the initial uprising are encapsulated in this account of the 22 February general strike by a seafarer in Yangon:

There are delegations of workers everywhere: seafarers like me, but also nurses, engineers, factory workers, teachers, bank staff, civil servants, students. The nurses and civil servants are the true heroes of democracy since they are the ones who started the CDM [civil disobedience movement]. But now everyone joins CDM. Even now the

construction workers are leaving the sites in downtown Yangon to join as the crowds gather and grow bigger. Everyone claps and cheers and sings when they see the sight of the railway workers marching in their columns. Everyone in the city knows that ALL the railway workers have been doing CDM... That day, it felt like every factory, every workplace, every township in Yangon was represented...

People were no longer the same. Something had changed inside them; something had changed in their souls... Complete strangers behave as if they have known each other their entire lives. Everyone is making speeches everywhere. Every street corner is turned into its own parliament. Students from Yangon University with their degrees and knowledge are debating politics with factory workers on street corners. But they do so as equals, as if everyone's opinion truly matters and is respected...

There is also the great reckoning with our past sins, such as what happened to the Rohingya and other ethnic groups that have been persecuted by the military... If history is to remember me for anything it is that I am sorry I did not stand up for the Rohingya when they were expelled from our country and murdered in their tens of thousands... The revolution must deliver justice for these people and cleanse our country of these past sins that have been committed in our names.

However, there is one thing I remember very vividly that day. Something that I will never forget until the day I die. It was the sight of these day labourers arriving in downtown Yangon. These workers are very, very poor... If they stop work, they may not be able to eat the next day. But groups of them have put in all their savings and hired vans... And they drive into Yangon from the poor townships with revolutionary songs blasting from the van's windows. People are hanging out of the vans shouting that everyone must join the revolution. And when I see them there in the streets of Yangon, I think to myself: how brave and heroic these people are! These people who have nothing, who suffer so much. If they can do it, anyone can!

And all of us are chanting: "WE WANT DEMOCRACY! THE REVOLUTION MUST WIN!" [\[4\]](#)

The following will sketch the trajectory of the revolutionary process since February to help frame the challenges for the forces opposed to Min Aung Hlaing's junta. I will make a series of points: that the working class was the engine of revolutionary struggle during the early months of the uprising and drew behind them other oppressed strata (small farmers and ethnic minorities); that the Burmese ruling class is not simply the generals in power and their conglomerate companies but a broader patchwork that includes Burmese state capital, "cronies" and regional capitalists; that the wing of the ruling class that was overthrown in the February coup is using the armed struggle against the junta to transform the revolutionary process into a form of capitalist restoration from above; that the inability of the February and March strike wave to topple the regime was due to the absence of a political leadership that could extend the strike movement into broader sections of the working class, transform the movement into a fight for control over production and promote widespread mutinies within the armed forces; and that the key task for revolutionaries in Myanmar today must be to begin laying the foundations for a revolutionary Marxist organisation that can cohere the most advanced workers into a fighting force capable of leading the mass of workers and drawing behind them the broader masses (small farmers and ethnic minorities) in a revolution that overturns not just military rule but the entire Burmese ruling class.

From civil disobedience to armed struggle

Strikes and demonstrations engulfed Myanmar after the Tatmadaw arrested State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and overthrew the newly elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government on 1 February 2021, installing Senior General Min Aung Hlaing at the head of the State Administration Council (SAC).

Beginning with small acts of defiance, such as the banging of pots and pans in central Yangon – a household tradition in Myanmar to ward off “evil spirits” – the call for a civil disobedience movement (CDM) against the SAC launched by health workers and civil servants, followed by demonstrations by garment workers in downtown Yangon on 6 February, acted as the social detonator for a countrywide movement opposed to the junta. Strikes paralysed whole swathes of industry while masses of people took to the streets in almost every corner of the country, culminating in the 22 February general strike that saw more than one million people march across Myanmar and many millions more participate in work stoppages.

In response, the Tatmadaw unleashed a fury of violence – including tear gas, water cannons, telecommunications and electricity shutdowns, curfews and mass arrests – in efforts to intimidate protesters and detain strike leaders. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, more than 2,100 people had been arrested and more than 200 killed by early March.

The scale of repression affected the resistance to the junta, with the large street demonstrations and open-air assemblies predominant in the early weeks of the uprising replaced with intense street fighting, while in rural areas ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) began protecting demonstrators from security forces and carrying out attacks on military bases. In working-class districts protesters and striking workers built barricades out of garbage bins, carts, tyres and barbed wire, and major roads in the cities were permanently blockaded. In scenes reminiscent of Hong Kong’s 2019 uprising, protesters equipped themselves with hard hats, gas masks and makeshift shields to protect themselves during street fighting.

Meanwhile, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) – a group of parliamentarians largely drawn from the NLD – announced the formation of a National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG published a charter to rewrite the country’s constitution, which promised to enshrine rights for all ethnic minorities, including the stateless Rohingya, and establish a Federal Union Army based on the pre-existing EAOs.

The revolutionary process reached a new turning point on 8 March when a coalition of trade unions launched an indefinite general strike aimed at toppling the junta. Ahead of the general strike, some of the largest demonstrations since 22 February were held across the country, including mass sit-ins that defied night-time curfews and mass meetings of garment workers in the industrial districts of Yangon. According to the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM), large parts of the economy were completely paralysed by the general strike, including banks, shipyards, transport, railways, major factories, large-scale farms, oil refineries, mines, hospitals, schools and shopping centres. Importantly, all energy extraction had reportedly ceased, and the country’s fuel and energy reserves were dwindling.

The response of the Tatmadaw was to mobilise the armed forces at its command to crush the mass movement in a wave of counter-revolutionary terror: mass evictions of state-sector workers from government-provided housing were combined with massacres throughout the country. One incident, known as the Battle of Hlaing Tharyar, involved a four-day showdown of workers and students against the armed forces, which claimed the lives of at least 60 demonstrators in a working-class district of Yangon.

Since then, the countryside has become the key site of confrontation. Tens of thousands of youth and workers from the cities have sought safety in the ethnic-controlled borderlands, undergone guerrilla training and formed a number of armed groups under the banner of “People’s Defence Forces” (PDFs). These groups now clash with the Tatmadaw in parts of Chin, Shan, Karen and Kachin states, across the Sagaing region and throughout the Irrawaddy Delta. Urban resistance continues in the more limited form of targeted assassinations of military personnel and their informants, while daily flash-mob demonstrations continue in major cities and townships. It is [estimated](#) that as many as 4,000 soldiers and police have been killed by PDFs, while a reported 8,000 have defected to the opposition (2,000 soldiers and 6,000 police). [5]

Meanwhile, the economic fallout from the coup has inflicted devastating blows to workers’ living standards, with an estimated 1.2 million [jobs lost](#) in the first half of 2021 and [predictions](#) that almost half the population will be living below the poverty line in 2022. [6] This has been combined with a catastrophic third wave of [COVID-19](#), beginning in late May, which has claimed the lives of at least 16,000 people. [7] Similarly, the official death toll of those killed by security forces since the coup currently stands at more than 1,400 and over 8,000 have been arrested. The consequences of these catastrophic blows on the working class and poor on their willingness to continue resisting Min Aung Hlaing’s regime is unclear.

What is clear is that since the defeat of the extended general strike, the NUG has been able to assert itself as the de facto political leadership of the anti-coup forces. It has promoted intervention by regional powers, sanctions on military-controlled businesses and the increasing militarisation of the struggle. In early September, the NUG officially declared a “people’s revolutionary war” against Min Aung Hlaing’s regime. But the declaration of war simply formalised what had been the political situation on the ground for several months, with tens of thousands already under arms fighting the regime. At the time of writing, significant parts of the countryside where resistance forces predominate (Chin, Shan, Karen, Kachin states and the Sagaing region) are being transformed into smouldering ruins by the Tatmadaw’s counter-insurgency campaign, while bomb blasts and targeted assassinations of military personnel are an almost permanent feature of Myanmar’s urban landscape.

The engine of the revolution

The present impasse stands in stark contrast to the hopes and dreams of February. And the figures who now assert themselves as the de facto political leadership of the democratic forces – the NUG – could not be more removed from the workers, students, urban and rural poor and ethnic minorities who led the mass struggle against the coup in the early months of the uprising. Indeed, the initial source of strength of the uprising was not only its ability to mobilise in the streets, but in the workplaces as well.

Is Myanmar’s working-class capable of leading a revolution against Min Aung Hlaing’s regime? Marxists argue that the working class has a special ability to challenge the ruling class because it creates all the wealth in society and performs the labour that is necessary for society to function. In Myanmar, this picture has been complicated by decades of dictatorship, war, and the combined and uneven forms through which the country has been integrated into international circuits of capital accumulation. The [result](#) has been widespread land dispossession in rural areas which has underpinned a low wage informal sector (84 percent of the workforce) in rapidly expanding urban centres. [8] It has produced a working class that is combined and uneven in character. Workers and the poor are the majority, but those in formal employment are in a minority. Most workers still retain a connection to the countryside through employment in the agrarian sector or ownership over

small plots of land under constant threat of dispossession. Finally, militarised conflict in the borderlands has entrenched ethnic divisions that have pitted the Bamar-majority centre against the ethnic minorities in the periphery (30 to 40 percent of the population who occupy some 60 percent of Myanmar's total land area). Nevertheless, there are points in Myanmar's economy where concentrations of workers are endowed with immense potential power, such as the energy, extractive, export and transport sectors, and over the basic necessities of life that neither the civilian administrations nor the previous dictatorships have been able to provide for the majority of people.

The trajectory of working-class mobilisation throughout February and March also illustrates that it is possible to build unity in collective action between the employed and unemployed, between those in the "formal" sector (with higher wages or levels of education and professional status) and those who are marginalised and socially excluded, and between the Bamar centre and the ethnic periphery that have historically been pitted against each other. It is also significant that those sections of the working class that have the highest concentrations of women (nurses and garment workers) played a central role in leading other workers in struggle, breaking down sexist stereotypes that see women as passive and subordinate.

The unifying feature of these combined and uneven forms of consciousness was a defence of democracy that went beyond a simple reinstatement of the elected government; it was an attempt to defend, and sometimes extend, the material interests of the working class alongside those of the urban and rural poor against the incursions of direct military rule.

Healthcare workers provided the initial spark of resistance. They had borne the brunt of Myanmar's woefully [inadequate healthcare system](#) during the pandemic. "The hospitals were already completely overrun by COVID-19 before the coup", explained one striking nurse from Yangon Workers' Hospital. "We knew that this situation will get much, much worse under another military dictatorship." [9]

White-collar workers in the state sector soon followed: teachers pledged to keep the schools closed as long as the junta remained in power; workers in the civil service paralysed entire sections of the state bureaucracy. Overall an estimated three-quarters of civil servants were out [on strike](#) during February, including an estimated 60 percent of state electricity workers. [10] They were joined by workers in the banking and financial sector, with the entire private banking sector shut down by mid-February.

Industrial workers in the energy and resources sector in Nyaungdon (west of Yangon) and Singu-Chauk (central Myanmar), were some of the first to join the call for strikes on 5 February. Hundreds of workers at the military-owned Kyisintaung copper mine soon followed, alongside farm workers in the nearby city of Minbu, who play an important role in producing the agricultural products that feed the domestic population.

Garment workers from Yangon's industrial zones were crucial to swelling the initial demonstrations on 6 February that then spread throughout the entire country. These workers perform the labour that underpins Myanmar's largest export sector and can seriously disrupt the flow of profits to the ruling class. It is not surprising that garment workers had been at the forefront of union organising for more than a decade, which endowed them with a confidence and militancy that proved decisive during the early resistance to the coup. Indeed, it was the widespread reports of mass meetings of garment workers, the video footage of hundreds of women staging sit-ins while banging pots and pans in the lunchrooms, and the sight of women workers marching to demonstrations in downtown Yangon that played a crucial role in giving confidence to other sections of the working class to strike.

After these garment workers had temporarily usurped the power of capital over labour, the reverberations of their strikes were felt back in the factories. “Many workers return to the factories and must fight the factory managers to prevent victimisation for participating in the strikes”, explained one garment worker from Hlaing Tharyar. “This was leading to more and more workplace protests and strikes against the victimisation. The strikes were like the spinning wheel on our sewing machines – round and round they go.” [11]

This spinning wheel propelled workers in the logistics sector into taking strike action. Railway workers participated in the 6 February demonstrations in downtown Yangon, going on to shut down the entire rail networks of both the commercial capital and Mandalay throughout the following week. They were joined by Yangon’s truckdrivers, about 90 percent of whom were on strike by mid-February. The action taken by the drivers, many of whom link up with Yangon’s major ports, propelled seafarers and shipyard workers into the strikes. Importantly, workers at Yangon’s two major ports – the Thilawa and Yangon terminals – who handle 90 percent of maritime cargo and 70 percent of the country’s total trade flows were some of the first to stop work. By late February there were widespread reports of shipping containers piling up in terminals. A striking seafarer from Yangon later explained: “One section of workers stops and all the wheels stop turning”. [12]

The general strikes of 8, 15 and 22 February brought all these incipient elements of class power together into what one train driver described as the “engine” of revolutionary struggle. [13] By this he meant the process whereby each general strike drew greater numbers of workers into centralised actions, before dispersing them back into their workplaces and out of which new battles were born. [14] These battles included the garment workers mentioned earlier or the 6 February demonstrations that propelled railway workers into the movement. It was these displays of workers’ power that led wider elements of “the people” into the struggle against Min Aung Hlaing’s regime: the urban poor, small farmers and sections of the ethnic minorities, including the persecuted Rohingya languishing in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. [15]

In the aftermath of each of these general strikes the regime tried to ramp up the level of repression in an effort to paralyse the movement. Initially the repression had a profoundly radicalising effect and drew increasing numbers into the fight. But as it increased and turned deadly, only the most militant would dare hit the streets, engaging in barricade-building and street fighting to sustain the broader strike wave. A librarian from Yangon who had joined one of the hundreds of street fighting groups across the country in early March explained: “We know that we can be arrested or killed by live rounds when the police and soldiers shoot at us – but we have to defend our comrades”. [16]

After a temporary lull in the size of street mobilisations it was in the lead up to the 8 March general strike that some of the largest demonstrations since 22 February were held. This is because of the sense of collective power and confidence that striking workers can endow broad sections of the population with. These actions included sit-in protests that defied the regime’s night-time curfews and martial law, alongside mass meetings of garment workers throughout Yangon’s industrial districts that urged all working-class and poor people to rally behind the indefinite shut-down of the economy until the regime had been overthrown.

A Yangon bank worker painted a picture of the country at the height of the extended general strike in mid March:

The hospitals are all closed; government buildings too. Money cannot be moved around like normal because all the banks are shut. The shipyards are at a standstill. The train drivers will not go back to work and the military does not know how to operate [the trains]. None of the shops are open and people say the workers on the big farms are refusing to work. All the factories are closed; and even if they were open there is very

little fuel or raw materials to power them since the oil workers are on strike. The country has ground to a complete standstill – without workers, the world stops moving. [17]

It was the threat that this extended general strike posed to the entire ruling class that led to the counter-revolutionary terror that followed. Mass evictions of railway workers, nurses, civil servants and bank workers were combined with the carnage in Hlaing Tharyar and the bloodbaths that took place elsewhere across the country. The seemingly indiscriminate nature of the violence had the sole purpose of paralysing the engine of mass struggle and crushing the social soul at the heart of the revolutionary process. Carlos Sardiña Galache provided an apt [depiction](#) of the terror when he wrote in late March: “Such brutality can be seen as the desperation of a cornered beast unleashing its fury in all directions”. [18]

Two Burmas

Any understanding of the Burmese ruling class and the character of its state must begin with the patterns of combined and uneven development established under British colonial rule, which integrated the region into the global capitalist system and demarcated the country into two administrative zones of accumulation: a lowland centre structured around rice paddy production in the Irrawaddy Delta and oil drilling in the central plains; and a borderland periphery structured around mining and forestry. The British developed racialised “ethnic” categories based on geographical region, language and customary practices, with those living in the lowland centre (Bamar, Mon and Rakhine) placed under direct British rule and excluded from participation in the colonial state, while those in the borderland peripheries (Kachin, Shan, Chin, Karenni) given some degree of self-administration in return for the plundering of their natural resources. As a consequence, the concentration of ownership and control over the means of production in a handful of British firms hindered the development of an indigenous bourgeoisie, while the solidification of ethnic identities made it harder for a unified national independence movement to emerge. [19]

The struggle against colonial rule and the Japanese occupation during the Second World War helped consolidate these “two Burmas” by demarcating the nationalist forces who collaborated with the British and US (Kachin, Karen, Chin, Arakan Muslims) and those who collaborated with the Japanese (Bamar, Arakan Buddhists). Since gaining independence from British rule in 1947, the Burmese state and its ruling class have been shaped by the conflicts between the Bamar centre and ethnic minority periphery, which has helped obscure the deeper struggle for control over the land and the labour that inhabits these “two Burmas.”

U Nu’s post-independence governments tried to solve the problems of uneven development through a state capitalist regime that nationalised large swathes of industry and substituted the state bureaucracy for a weak domestic bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, the attempt to build a centralised lowland state and impose it upon the periphery plunged the country into civil war and the rapid expansion of the Tatmadaw. The central state was confronted not only with the Communist Party of Burma, but an array of ethnic armies all seeking independence. Adding further complexity, these forces were joined by the remnants of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang armies that had retreated across the border after being defeated by Mao’s People’s Liberation Army. [20]

In a pattern repeated in much of the post-colonial world, the military emerged as the dominant wing of the ruling class. This process was exacerbated by the intensity of the ongoing armed conflicts in both the centre and the periphery, which coincided with the phase of rapid industrial development. Frontline officers became state administrators in a rapidly growing army that took on an expanded array of state functions. Through the Defence Services Institute the officer corps became the largest

bloc of capitalists in the country, with interests in banking, manufacturing, construction, real estate, hotels, mining, agriculture, transport, entertainment, media, and a monopoly over import and export licenses. The Tatmadaw took advantage of ongoing crises in U Nu's regime and was temporarily handed power in a 1958 "caretaker government", before carrying out a definitive coup d'état under the leadership of General Ne Win (Tatmadaw commander-in-chief) in March 1962.

Ne Win's regime tried to solve the problems of uneven development by radicalising the state capitalist project under the banner of the "Burmese Way to Socialism". All remaining industries were nationalised, foreign and private capital confiscated and driven from the country, and through the export of oil the regime sought to build an advanced manufacturing base centred on heavy industry. The counter-insurgency campaigns against the left and ethnic armies continued throughout this period. Formal political power was eventually handed to the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in the early 1970s, perfecting the model of one-party Stalinist dictatorships seen elsewhere, with Ne Win preserved as head of state.

Yet by the 1980s the BSPP project was floundering, struggling to manage inflation and a sharp decline in oil prices. The structural adjustment programmes that sought to deal with these issues led to a wave of strikes and demonstrations throughout 1987 and 1988. Ne Win was forced to resign as head of state, but that did little to quell unrest. The movement culminated in a nationwide general strike in August 1988, including army mutinies and the widespread formation of township strike committees. The absence of a revolutionary leadership allowed Aung San Suu Kyi (daughter of Aung San, the military leader who led the independence struggle against colonial rule) and a section of former military officers grouped under the banner of the National League for Democracy, to channel a semi-insurrectionary movement into a tepid fight for free and fair elections. The Tatmadaw were eventually able to regain control of the situation, with a group of younger officers and generals seizing power in a coup and installing themselves at the head of the State Law and Order Council (SLORC). In the counter-revolutionary terror that followed, thousands of civilians were massacred and protest leaders cremated alive, while those who escaped such a fate, such as Suu Kyi, were thrown into jail or put under house arrest. The BSPP regime was dissolved, trade unions were outlawed, and the 1990 election results (which the NLD won in a landslide) were overturned. General Than Shwe and those grouped around him came to consolidate themselves within the SLORC, which they later renamed the State Peace and Development Council in the mid-1990s. [21]

Burmese capitalism in the neoliberal era

Than Shwe's dictatorship oversaw the neoliberal transformation of Burma, now renamed Myanmar. His regime opened up the economy to foreign investment and gained access to large swathes of land and natural resources through ceasefire agreements with ethnic minority leaders. In doing so, the military leadership built an accumulation model structured around extractive industries in the borderlands and periphery – gas, rare earth minerals, precious stones, timber – that then laid the basis for the development of garment manufacturing, construction and finance in the lowland centre. That transformation has given the Burmese ruling class a number of distinct features that have persisted to this day:

1. The Tatmadaw plays a dominant role within both the state and the capitalist class.

In the absence of a strong domestic bourgeoisie a section of the officer corps transformed themselves from the managers of capital on behalf of the state into owners who now controlled the means of production. Than Shwe's regime established two military-owned conglomerates: Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Company Limited (UMEHL), with interests in banking, trade, tourism

and precious stones, and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), with interests in heavy industry, mining and energy. As the regime opened up Myanmar's economy to overseas markets, UMEHL and MEC were able to absorb large parts of foreign direct investment.

At the same time, the Tatmadaw has carried out a massive expansion of its own ranks, devoting nearly half the state budget to the security sector. This included placing the riot police under its direct command, acquiring a range of advanced military hardware, and increasing the military's total numbers from 180,000 in the late 1980s to an estimated 400,000 today. Meanwhile, former military officers continue to populate large sections of the state bureaucracy's upper ranks.

The Tatmadaw's monopoly over the means of violence and sections of the state bureaucracy is enshrined in the 2008 constitution, with a quarter of seats in both houses of the parliament reserved for military appointees. This ensures that it can block any constitutional amendment, alongside control over the ministries of defence and home affairs.

2. Burmese state capital continues to play a dominant role in the economy through the natural resource SEEs (state-owned economic enterprises).

Another consequence of having a weak domestic bourgeoisie was that privatisations were initially resisted until the Tatmadaw had secured its position within the capitalist class through its own conglomerates, which they achieved in an alliance with Burmese state capital, selling certain state assets to themselves while retaining state monopolies in key sectors. The largest SEEs are centred on the highly profitable extractive industries, including fossil fuels, minerals, timber and pearls.

The Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise's (MOGE) project in the Andaman Sea, the Yadana gas fields, is illustrative of this process. In 1994, MOGE signed a memorandum of understanding to supply Thailand with natural gas. [\[22\]](#) Chevron and Total then entered a joint venture to build and operate the pipeline. The Tatmadaw assisted by clearing a route through the Tenasserim and committed itself to protecting the project against attacks from armed ethnic groups. Today, more than \$US460 million in rent is generated for the Burmese state each year, with significant profits going to both Chevron and Total. This arrangement is a mutually beneficial relationship for both the Burmese ruling class and its foreign partners.

Meanwhile, Burma generates an estimated \$US31 billion in jade sales to China each year – with Kachin state alone producing 70 percent of the world's jade supply. [Similarly](#), an estimated half of China's rare earth feedstock is supplied by Burmese state-run mines. The majority of these profits go unreported and are siphoned into specially designated "other accounts" held by state officials and military personnel. [\[23\]](#)

The ongoing dominance of Burmese state capital within the ruling class means that while the SEEs employ just 145,000 people in a population of 54 million, they generate around approximately half of state revenues and receive half the state budget. Their central economic and political position allows them to exert an enormous influence over the broader direction of capital accumulation, including through their ability to dispense licenses and contracts in return for rents and profit shares.

To the extent that a private bourgeoisie has emerged in the neoliberal era, they have been reliant on nepotistic relations with the Tatmadaw. They have been a vital source of capital, contracts and access to international networks in China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan and Singapore. These "cronies" made fortunes exporting timber, rare gems, minerals and agricultural commodities, providing them with the capital to form construction firms that would capitalise on increased government infrastructure spending and a boom in private real estate. When privatisations of state assets finally did take place, the main beneficiaries were the conglomerates that these capitalists

now controlled. Today, these cronies and their conglomerates are believed to comprise just 5 percent of firms but – alongside the military-controlled conglomerates and Burmese state capital – control the majority of the country’s wealth. [24]

3. The persistence of the national question.

The attempt to build a modern nation-state that unifies the centre and the periphery has been a constant theme of Burma’s modern history. It finds its expression in the ruling ideology of the “national races”. While no single legal text fully captures this ruling ideology, the BSPP’s 1982 Citizenship Laws helped codify Myanmar’s ethnic divisions into 135 “national races”, all of whom were part of a greater historical kingdom known as Burma that lived harmoniously until the arrival of the British. The important exception to this historical mythmaking is the Rohingya Muslim population of Rakhine state, who continue to be considered illegal aliens from Bangladesh and part of the calamities inaugurated by British rule. The different groups that make up the “national races” approach the ideology in different ways and interpretations are politically contested within each group. For Bamar ethno-nationalists, it establishes a beneficial hierarchy that places them at the top, while for Kachin nationalism it involves freeing its members from the constraints imposed by the central Burmese state. By contrast, Rakhine nationalism hinges on the recovery of an imagined past as an independent and powerful kingdom. [25]

The patchwork of ceasefire agreements signed between Than Shwe’s regime and a number of ethnic minority leaders has left political and economic power in the borderlands divided among a bewildering array of actors, including the central government, various armed groups, militias working with the government, ethnic warlords and networks of local and regional capital. Each of these groups is in a perpetual competition with the others for territory and resources. [26]

The result has been forms of primitive accumulation that Kevin Woods terms “ceasefire capitalism”: in the mountainous borderlands, ethnic minority populations have been pushed into camps for the internally displaced to clear land for extractive projects, in particular forestry and mining; in the lowland Irrawaddy Delta and central plains, forms of indebtedness continue to force small farmers off the land into urban areas, while former rice paddy growing regions have been cleared to establish large-scale agribusiness such as inland fisheries and palm oil plantations. Despite most land in Myanmar being inhabited by small farmers and ethnic minorities, the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law passed in 2012 makes that land ownerless unless forms of legal certification can be provided, most of which does not exist. The impact of the law is illustrated by the fact that an estimated 45 million acres of land qualifies as vacant, fallow or virgin, of which 82 percent is in ethnic minority states. [27]

Meanwhile, the “national races” ideology has justified the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. This has taken many forms, from the denial of citizenship and statehood to the stoking of ethnic tensions, culminating in the Tatmadaw’s 2017 campaign of forced transfers that included military rape, murder and the torching of homes. An estimated 30,000 Rohingya were murdered, more than 40,000 disappeared (presumed dead), and over 700,000 expelled into Bangladesh. [28] These atrocities have also produced attempts by ethno-nationalist militias to establish an independent Rohingya state, though their prospects are limited.

– “Discipline flourishing democracy”

The period of “discipline flourishing democracy” (the power-sharing agreement between the Tatmadaw and elected civilian leaders enshrined in the 2008 constitution) promised to usher in a new era of freedom and prosperity for workers and the poor. It was celebrated by the bourgeois

media as an important step toward a more democratic society. In truth, the reforms were carefully designed by Than Shwe and the ruling generals to relinquish part of their power while maintaining a dominant and leading role for themselves in the country's political and economic landscape. It was also a manoeuvre through which many of the Western sanctions on the regime would be lifted and open up the country's capitalist class to widened opportunities for capital accumulation.

During the 1990s, Than Shwe's regime created a proto-party body, the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) to help build local patronage networks and a base of support for the regime. By 2009, the USDA claimed some 25 million members, including state-sector workers (a mandatory requirement), prominent and emerging capitalists, teachers and students. The USDA was then transformed into the USDP to contest the 2010 elections, which it won in a landslide – largely due to the fact the NLD refused to contest them – with former general U Thein Sein becoming the first “democratically elected” leader of the country in over 50 years. From 2011 to 2015, Thein Sein's USDP government introduced many of the liberal-democratic reforms often associated with liberal or social-democratic parties, such as the legalisation of trade unions, alongside increases in health and education spending.

The dominant political party during “discipline flourishing democracy” was of course Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. The NLD is a liberal-bourgeois party; its founding members and leading personnel – Suu Kyi, former military officers, lawyers, journalists, intellectuals, doctors and other middle-class professionals – are all thoroughly committed to the rule of capital. Despite claiming more than one million members, most are drawn from the urban and rural middle classes and have no ability to influence the decision-making or policies of the NLD leadership. Meanwhile, Suu Kyi's ongoing association with the struggle against the previous junta and the country's founding “national father” (Aung San) provides the NLD with its popular and nationalist appeal.

The liberal-bourgeois character of Suu Kyi and the NLD explains why they were willing to compromise with the Tatmadaw and accept the parameters of the 2008 constitution. This meant providing legitimacy to the power-sharing agreement with the military, as well as supporting and adopting most of the USDP's policies and courting many of the country's “cronies”. It also explains the NLD's terrible treatment of ethnic minorities, most notably their enthusiastic support for the Tatmadaw's campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya, alongside their use of repression against workers and small farmers in the lowland Bamar centre. Despite this, Suu Kyi and the NLD have remained extremely popular electorally – largely due to the absence of a credible alternative to their left grounded in the workers' movement and rural poor – winning both the 2015 and 2020 elections in a landslide before being overthrown in the February coup.

Why did Min Aung Hlaing decide to seize power? Four “enabling conditions” stand out:

1. Ongoing dependency on East and South East Asian capital.

Despite the lifting of sanctions, “discipline flourishing democracy” did not lead to a significant increase in FDI from Western capital, and the fallout from the Rohingya genocide had a particularly negative impact on investment. Instead, the key drivers of capital accumulation continued to be Singapore, China and Thailand. Meanwhile, the economic fallout from COVID-19 has only exacerbated this dependency on sections of the Asia region, in particular China.

2. Splits in the ruling class.

In government, Suu Kyi and the NLD have tried to weaken the grip of the officer corps and Burmese state capital over the direction of capital accumulation through stricter regulation of state operations and finances, attempts to privatise a number of “underperforming” SEEs, and

transferring control over arms of the state bureaucracy away from the Tatmadaw. Significantly, a number of “cronies” have expressed support for the economic reforms and the moderate elements in the USDP are not opposed to them either.

3. Crisis in the military-proxy party.

Although the USDP still enjoys support among capitalists active in heavy industries, resource extraction, large and medium-scale agribusiness, soldiers and their families, alongside the most reactionary sections of the Buddhist clergy, together these forces do not provide a wide enough base of support to present the USDP as a viable electoral vehicle. In recent years, the USDP has been riven by splits and controversies. Many members left to form minor parties, and some even joined the NLD. Meanwhile, moderate USDP leaders have recently changed their candidate rules so that they no longer favour retired military officers. The 2020 election results also dashed Ming Aung Hlaing’s aspirations to transition from military to civilian leader: despite the Tatmadaw’s control over 25 percent of seats in both houses of parliament, the USDP’s abysmal results would not be enough to appoint Min Aung Hlaing prime minister.

4. Ongoing armed conflicts against ethnic minorities.

Despite significant hype among the liberal establishment, Suu Kyi and the NLD did little to advance the ceasefire agreements of the previous military regime. Meanwhile, the war in Rakhine state between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army, an ethno-nationalist militia complicit in the atrocities committed against the Rohingya, aggravated tensions between the officer corps and the NLD. Despite the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw brokering an informal ceasefire agreement and calling for the 2020 elections to take place in the Rakhine state, the NLD-appointed electoral commission cancelled them, as well as elections in a number of other minority areas. The conflict in Arakan – both Suu Kyi’s unwillingness to acquiesce to the Tatmadaw and legitimate grievances over voter suppression – created a window of opportunity through which the most hardened section of the officer corps could reassert their dominance. The hard right in the USDP pursued claims of voter fraud against the NLD; while these were rejected by the electoral commission, they created the justification for the February coup.

Instead of marking a definitive rupture with the politics of “discipline flourishing democracy” – a framework established by the military leadership to ensure their ongoing political and economic dominance over the country – Min Aung Hlaing’s coup is an attempt to reconfigure the arrangement. His regime represents a distinct constellation of class forces that have been unable to present a popular political alternative to Suu Kyi and the NLD. This includes the leading personnel of the Tatmadaw, the military-controlled conglomerates, Burmese state capital, the cronies who are willing to remain subservient to state patronage networks, the most reactionary sections of the Buddhist clergy and the hard right in the USDP.

Min Aung Hlaing’s regime has sought to strengthen the most crony aspects of state patronage networks through its recently announced Myanmar Economic Recovery Plan (MERP). The MERP is a carbon copy of a similar plan proposed by the NLD prior to the coup, including major tax breaks for the rich and big business, with a few tweaks in the interests of the state capitalists. Meanwhile, the new government has put forward plans for new oil and gas refineries, an expansion of palm oil plantations, plus a number of infrastructure upgrades in Naypyidaw. The contracts will be awarded in corrupt public-partnerships that resemble those that built Than Shwe’s regime throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Despite being somewhat disgruntled by the coup, the key regional players involved in capital accumulation in the country – China, Thailand and Singapore – have shown no signs of withdrawing

from the huge infrastructure projects they have spent decades building. There is little to suggest that the economic sanctions targeting the regime will do anything but replicate the effect of earlier sanctions and strengthen this ongoing dependency on the Asia region. (This is not to mention the vast accumulated funds that Burmese state capital has at its disposal to weather such a storm. [29]) Meanwhile, the burden of the broader economic fallout will continue to fall upon the working-class in the form of job losses and austerity.

Min Aung Hlaing has also consolidated his position within the officer corps by continuing to promote a younger generation of field commanders and generals who are loyal to him and purging moderate elements who worked closely with the ousted NLD government, limiting the prospects of a palace coup. He has also sought to “reform” Myanmar’s first-past-the-post electoral system, which benefited the NLD. The result of the reforms will not only help the USDP and the generals rebuild themselves electorally but also enable a plethora of minority parties in ethnic states to challenge the NLD’s electoral dominance. Meanwhile, the ongoing trial of Suu Kyi and other high-ranking NLD officials serve as a useful bargaining chip in the long term should the situation turn against the Tatmadaw.

The left and the democratic transition

If there was a rupture with “discipline flourishing democracy” it was the February and March uprising against the coup. The uprising was a clear refusal to collaborate with both the military leadership and the ruling class more broadly. Much of this was made possible by years of militant organising by workers, students and the rural poor against the civilian-military governments and strikes against the previous military dictatorship. [30] Despite the limitations of the liberalisation process, the widening of democratic freedoms under civilian-military rule created a space in which workers and other oppressed layers could organise more openly against the deeply entrenched inequalities that characterise the country and attempt to advance their own class interests.

The legalisation of trade unions, the institutionalisation of collective bargaining, and the establishment of an arbitration body stacked with former army personnel and representatives of capital was a concession. The hope was to prevent strikes like those that had broken out across the garment sector in 2009-10 at the end of Than Shwe’s dictatorship. But almost as soon as the first piece of labour legislation passed in 2011, the Hlaing Tharyar, Shwepyithar and Hmawbi industrial districts on the outskirts of Yangon erupted in a further wave of strikes, leading to the creation of dozens of new factory-based [unions](#). [31]

Another wave of strikes engulfed the garment sector in 2015-17, including a 2017 riot in which hundreds of workers descended on the Hangzhou Hundred-Tex Garment factory on the outskirts of Yangon, damaging factory vehicles, breaking windows, wrecking machinery, attacking management and taking several managers hostage. (The riot followed a 15-month strike over unpaid overtime that resulted in the factory’s union leader being fired.) Then, in 2019, garment workers led another wave of wildcat strikes before COVID-19 was used to crack down on militancy.

The expansion of the right to strike and form a trade union helped give space for activists to create hundreds of new unions during the transition. And unlike countries in which trade unions are well established, with entrenched bureaucracies and passive leaderships, many of these unions were established through wildcat strikes and even riots.

Similarly, the establishment of a land disputes body stacked with former state officials by Thein Sein’s USDP government sparked a number of struggles waged by small farmers over land that had been confiscated under Than Shwe’s dictatorship. These struggles were most acute in areas across

the Irrawaddy Delta, the Monywa and Sagaing regions, and in a number of ethnic-minority areas. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD were just as repressive against these small farmers as their counterparts in the USDP, and strengthened the laws that give big business access to large swathes of occupied land.

Student activists fought to re-establish student unions, which had been banned under the previous dictatorship. These activists faced stiff resistance from university administrations and supporters of the old regime. The combative climate generated by this activism also led to the creation of a range of political associations where students could discuss and debate political topics openly for the first time in over five decades. A number of more explicitly radical forums also flourished, including Marxist discussion circles in Yangon.

Radical students in major cities also built networks with workers and supported strikes and riots whenever they broke out. In more regional areas, student activists built similar networks with small farmers around questions of land dispossession and environmental issues. And student opposition to state-sanctioned crimes against ethnic minorities (such as the atrocities committed in Rakhine state against the Rohingya and other groups in the periphery) was an important aspect of [student activism](#) during the transition, particularly in Yangon. [32] Again, many of the same repressive laws being used to persecute NLD officials under the new dictatorship were used against left-wing activists during this period.

It was radical students and garment workers who launched the 6 February demonstrations that helped catalyse the initial actions by healthcare workers (many of whom were former student activists) and acted as the social detonator for the [revolutionary movement](#) that followed. [33] A garment worker from Yangon later explained that the joint solidarity between students and workers over the years is what enabled them to join forces on 6 February and throughout the coming weeks:

We are used to strikes at the factories but striking against the military with guns is different. We have not engaged in political strikes before. But the students have plenty of this experience. And around these parts, many workers know that the students always support the workers when they strike. [34]

The targeting of these activists and the practical outlawing of most trade unions in Myanmar since the coup has been a calculated move to uproot these networks and deny them the capacity to act. One of the effects of the repression has been the severing of these links, albeit not entirely. Underground organising of workers at the point of production continues under the new military regime, despite the extreme difficulties and danger involved. [35] But the overall trend among the left has been to abandon the promotion of working-class self-activity and join the proliferation of armed groups that have emerged after the defeat of the March general strike.

A “people’s revolutionary war”?

The wing of the ruling class that was overthrown in the February coup has regrouped as the National Unity Government (NUG). While led by the NLD, the NUG contains a number of politicians from ethnic minorities, and has sought to move beyond the conflict between the centre and the periphery through a political programme for a new Burmese state: a new constitution and a federalist political system that grants autonomy to ethnic minority regions as well as citizenship for the Rohingya. A component of the NUG’s strategy for power is the “people’s revolutionary war”, which seeks to hegemonise the various militias (“people’s defence forces” or PDFs) that have emerged in opposition to the coup, alongside drawing in the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) who have either been at war or maintained ceasefires with the Burmese regime prior to the coup. [36]

There are two types of PDFs currently fighting Min Aung Hlaing's regime: autonomous local defence forces and those directly linked to the NUG's ministry of defence. The local groups developed out of grassroots struggles against security forces, and largely operate independently from the NUG. Meanwhile, the other armed groups maintain stronger connections to the NUG: some have been directly created by the NUG, while others have sought to associate themselves more closely with the parallel government.

At the time of writing, there are as many as 500 PDFs operating across the country with most acting as township-level militias. The size of each unit ranges from large groups comprising several hundred personnel to small cells of two or three dozen. Estimates of their numbers range from 25,000 armed fighters to as many as 100,000, including those in training or seeking to enlist. These numbers can be added to the 30,000 guerrilla fighters who make up the ethnic militias currently engaged in combat against the regime.

These numbers pale in comparison to the Tatmadaw's estimated 400,000 troops, Border Guard Forces, and pro-government militias. Yet they have placed Min Aung Hlaing's regime under pressure, stretching it thin in a number of outlying regions, inflicting an estimated 4,000 casualties and producing a steady flow of defections. Many of these defectors help train and lead the armed insurgents and play a prominent role in carrying out extensive propaganda operations aimed at promoting defections and mutinies within the ranks of the Tatmadaw.

The resistance forces currently predominate along five main "fronts": the western corridor of Sagaing and Chin states; Kachin state where the Kachin Independence Army operates; the eastern front of Kayah and Kayin states where PDFs fight alongside factions of the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karenni National Progressive Party; northern Shan state where the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and its Northern Alliance have been engaged in fighting; and across the Irrawaddy Delta and central plains where a mosaic of urban and rural guerrillas are engaged in a diffuse and urbanised insurgency involving bombings and assassinations of military personnel.

Meanwhile, the NUG is based in Kayin state under the protection of the KNU, with the forces in the other areas largely outside its operational control or command. Importantly, the Arakan Army in Rakhine state and the United Wa State Army and its partners in Shan state have maintained their ceasefires and adopted a position of armed neutrality in relation to Min Aung Hlaing's regime.

In their report for the Wilson Centre, "Seizing the State: The Emergence of a District Security Actor in Myanmar", Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Meyers argue that there are two main factors currently hindering the NUG's "revolutionary war". The first is their lack of heavy armaments, which makes it difficult for the PDFs to capture and hold territory and counter the Tatmadaw's superior ground and airpower. The other is their lack of a centralised command and control structure able to overcome that of the Tatmadaw. Given these advantages, the Tatmadaw can concentrate their forces against isolated and uncoordinated insurgents, reducing and defeating them over the course of months, if not years. Meanwhile, many of the EAOs are rightly distrustful of the NLD-led NUG given previous treatment of the ethnic minorities and have not yet engaged beyond the borders of their ethnic areas to save besieged PDFs.

Historically, the Tatmadaw adopted a similar strategy against the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) by containing them to the borderlands while wiping out isolated pockets in the central regions; a similar approach was adopted against the All Burma Students' Democratic Front in the aftermath of the 1988 uprising.

Indeed, armed struggle is nothing new on the Burmese left and has played a fundamentally

destructive role. The CPB's turn to armed struggle during the Second World War and the early independence period was disastrous, helping to subordinate the working class to bourgeois-nationalist forces, creating a highly militarised political terrain that excluded the working class from independent action, and giving the Tatmadaw a reason to construct a centralised repressive apparatus that could be used against workers and the poor. [37] This reflected a broader shift in Stalinised Communist parties internationally, where the goal of working-class self-emancipation was replaced with class collaboration and the substitution of other class forces (such as armed groups inspired by Maoism). In this respect, those on the Burmese left who are joining the armed popular militias have not yet broken with this disastrous legacy.

Hein and Meyers argue that in order to overcome current limitations, the militias will need to find a way to gain access to heavy artillery, most likely through regional powers such as China, bring the local and national groups under centralised command structures and find ways to address the NLD's poor record with the ethnic minorities. In other words, the "people's revolutionary war" is a form of capitalist restoration from above: a stagist strategy that seeks to limit the struggle against Min Aung Hlaing to the restoration of bourgeois democracy. Such an approach necessarily subordinates the class interests of workers and the poor, delaying their demands and grievances until the distant future when a stable democracy has been achieved.

The militarised approach represents a fundamental rupture with the revolutionary movement seen in the early weeks of February and March 2021. Where strikes and mass demonstrations gave other workers confidence and drew them and broader layers into the struggle, bombings, targeted assassinations and gunfights achieve the opposite. Tragically, the increasing militarisation of the resistance is helping consolidate a political terrain that excludes the democratic and popular participation of the working class and "the people".

It is unlikely that the military struggle can topple the Tatmadaw. However even if the "people's revolutionary war" is successful, the NLD's record in power has clearly indicated that the NUG will not confront the many problems facing workers and the poor. There have been no indications made by the NUG that it would provide a solution to the concentration of wealth among the capitalist class; nor have they made any indication that they will repeal the laws that persecute small farmers and push them off their land; and the NLD's deplorable track record with the ethnic minorities means that a democratic solution to the national questions, complete self-determination over land and labour is unlikely, since the borderlands are a key site of capital accumulation for the domestic and regional capitalists they seek to represent. This is because challenging any of these conditions means taking on the economic and political power of the Burmese ruling class, which we know the forces coalesced around the NUG have no interest in doing. Instead, the NUG would seek to [privatise](#) larger sections of state capital in order to weaken the officer corps, as indicated in the NLD's economic reform agenda prior to the coup. [38] Yet any switch to a more fully marketised economy would simply open up the country to more parasitic domestic and foreign investment by big capital. These measures would only further exacerbate the tendencies toward land dispossession in rural areas that has underpinned the growth of low-wage employment in urban centres.

All of this points to the problems with such a stagist view of revolution that seeks to limit the struggle against Min Aung Hlaing's regime to the narrow conquest of capitalist state power by a broad alliance between workers, the poor and disaffected parts of the urban elite. This is not to deny that some armed component will be necessary to overthrow Min Aung Hlaing; but the goal for those committed to seeing the tasks of Myanmar's unfinished revolution succeed (political and economic democracy, land to small farmers and self-determination for the ethnic minorities) should not be aiding the construction of a new "bureaucratic-military machine" that is unable to solve any of these problems.

From combined and uneven development to permanent revolution

Leon Trotsky's theory of [permanent revolution](#) [39] offers an alternative to stagist views of revolution. It does this by combining democratic and socialist challenges to the existing order of things. In Myanmar these include: the acquisition of the land by small farmers against the big landed interests bound up with former military personnel, state officials and their cronies; the resolution of the national question; and, of course, the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy through the overthrow of Min Aung Hlaing's regime. None of these demands are, in themselves, incompatible with capitalist social relations; but achieving them in the context of Myanmar's combined and uneven development necessarily raises the possibility of social revolution in order to break the nexus of class forces through which Min Aung Hlaing's junta is held together.

Trotsky's theory argues that only the working class can offer a solution to these tasks by challenging the entire basis of capitalist social relations. Although the working class may be young and small in number, their concentration in large, modern enterprises, in sectors of the economy crucial to the state and regional networks of capitalists, gives them the necessary social weight to take up the political leadership of the "democratic revolution" against the military dictatorship. Instead of voluntarily handing political power back to the bourgeoisie, which is incapable of leading the struggle against the Tatmadaw, the working class can turn the democratic revolution into a socialist revolution, bypassing the need for a phase of bourgeois democracy. The isolation of such a revolution in Myanmar would need to be ended by the internationalisation of the revolutionary process through similar struggles across the broader Asia region.

Trotsky's theory is also closely connected to the Marxist attitude to the capitalist state and revolutionary crisis. All revolutions that have involved a significant working-class component have produced situations of "dual power": a stand-off between organs of workers' power against a severely weakened capitalist state. These institutions of workers' power emerge organically from revolutionary struggle itself, such as the need to coordinate strikes, formulate political demands, defend the masses against capitalist state violence and continue to provide essential services under the control of workers themselves. But the existence of dual power and institutions of workers' power alone are insufficient to defeat the capitalist state; a revolutionary organisation with the goal of a working-class seizure of power is necessary to ensure that the capitalist state is unable to regroup.

With this in mind: why was Myanmar's working class unable to topple Min Aung Hlaing's regime during the great wave of strikes throughout February and March? Two factors stand out:

1. The inability to create a second governmental power of the toiling masses.

The general strikes of 8, 15 and 22 February had united workers with the urban and rural poor, making them the driving force of the revolutionary struggle. The extended general strike that began on 8 March took the next step, and began to pose the question of who should govern Myanmar in a more direct way. Through each of these general strikes it was possible to capture glimpses of a revolutionary government of the toiling masses.

For example, the CDM support networks that stretched from trade unions to community groups and helped sustain striking workers illustrates the power of ordinary people to draw on their own collective resources and provide the necessities often carried out by the state: food, water, welfare, medical aid, alongside shelter for those avoiding arrest. Similarly, the neighbourhood self-defence organisations and streetfighters acted as militia that carried out protection and surveillance against the repressive arms of the state.

But the core of the general strikes were the committees organised directly by striking workers themselves. In some places these committees took direct control over production: electricity workers in Yangon occupied their workplaces to prevent security forces from conducting night-time raids in early February; seafarers, truckdrivers and shipyard workers at Yangon terminal began organising the transport of food, medicine and other essential goods in late February and early March. [40]

In their most developed form, strike committees fused with neighbourhood self-defence organisations, such as that which took place in a housing compound near Ma Hlwa Gone station in Yangon's Mingalay Taung Nyunt township. [41] The strike committee became the main political authority in the area, involving railway workers, nurses, doctors, teachers, civil servants, students and other locals in joint struggle against the coup, organising pickets and occupations of workplaces (such as the regular confrontations with security forces at a number of train stations and railyards throughout Yangon), attempted to fraternise and negotiate with soldiers, performed night-time security patrols of the area, alongside providing necessities to locals. While similar bodies remained isolated geographically in pockets of Yangon, locals in Mandalay and Bago also reported the existence of neighbourhood strike committees. [42]

Unfortunately, these revolutionary initiatives never congealed into a coherent system of collective self-management. In order to rise to the level of a revolutionary government of the toiling masses these experiences would need to be generalised at both a local and national level. They would also need to penetrate into the centres of capital accumulation that remained largely unscathed by the strikes, in particular the gas fields of the Andaman Sea and the jade mines of Kachin state. In doing so, they could have begun to provide a basis for a network of workers' councils that could eventually challenge for power.

It is reasonable to suggest that the General Strike Committees formed in mid-February could have played such a role had they been able to develop. Through the strike committees, it might have been possible to form both township strike committees and a national body that could place the working class in a better position to answer the questions raised by the 8 March extended general strike. If fuel and energy supplies ran out, workers could restart production under their own control to power working-class and popular districts while continuing to paralyse Min Aung Hlaing's regime and the capitalist class. The farms, food-processing plants and markets could have been run along similar lines. In general, a self-consciously pro-revolutionary leadership of the workers' movement would find ways to extend and deepen the movement while continuing to meet the needs of its popular base and the wavering middle layers. If workers started occupying and seizing their workplaces to carry out these tasks, other questions would have been raised; in particular the "sacred" right of private property and management's right to manage could be challenged. In contrast to the CRPH, this kind of political authority would have been an organic expression of the people involved in the day-to-day struggles against the dictatorship: one capable of posing a direct challenge to the political and economic power of Min Aung Hlaing's regime.

Meanwhile, the inability of forms of workers' power to take hold in the capital city of Naypyitaw, the seat of government, meant that the military could ride out the most difficult days. By constructing an artificial capital city, far away from the urban hub of Rangoon (Yangon), the military successfully prevented the masses from applying the type of pressure that forced a section of the officer corps to break with the [BSPP regime](#) in 1988. [43] Any strategy that does not seek to confront and ultimately destroy the heart of Min Aung Hlaing's regime in Naypyitaw cannot succeed, as it leaves the core of the officer corps intact and enables them to continue functioning.

Similarly, the movement has been doomed by its inability to promote mass mutinies inside the Tatmadaw. To deprive the state of its repressive apparatus, or at least to weaken it fundamentally, has been crucial to the success of most modern revolutions.

Many have tried to argue that the Tatmadaw is a military like no other, impervious to such appeals. Bertil Lintner, writing in the *Asia Times*, argued that a combination of factors ensured that no cracks opened in the regime. He lists its “dual-function” ideology, which justifies the military’s prominent role in economic and social development as well as national defence (the “Three Main Causes”); its powerful economic interests through military-controlled companies; and a fear of retribution for their many crimes, whether previous atrocities in ethnic regions, or the recent ones carried out while crushing the uprising. [44] But the cracks that have emerged through defections to the anti-coup movement reveal the same class divisions that structure any modern military.

“There is a huge gap in the wealth between the upper and lower ranks of the Tatmadaw”, explains former military Captain Nyi Thuta, one of several hundred defectors and a founder of the group People’s Soldiers, which has been at the forefront of aiding defections. [45] The upper ranks of the Tatmadaw are drawn overwhelmingly from the ruling class and retain economic, family and social ties with that class, while the middle and lower ranks are drawn from the urban and rural poor. “Only the top-level officials are associated with the business sector of the military”, he says. “These officials get the profits from these businesses, while the rank-and-file personnel do not get any share. Although they [the generals] always speak about ‘state-building’, it appears to many of us that they are simply ‘building’ for themselves.”

Furthermore, Captain Thuta says that out of 400,000 soldiers, only 20 percent have been deployed to commit violence against civilians. Throughout February and March, the bulk of the violence was committed by the military-controlled riot police, while most soldiers remained in the barracks. This suggests the rank and file are unreliable, or at least perceived to be so by their officers.

Further proof of this is demonstrated by the means through which loyalty has been maintained. Soldiers and their families live a tightly controlled existence, residing in military compounds that require permission to leave, resulting in what Captain Thuta describes as a “hostage” situation. “Many soldiers wish to defect”, he explains, referencing the 75 percent of soldiers who reportedly reject the coup. “But they fear for the safety and lives of their families who remain on the military bases. For those that have a family to worry about, they are not prepared to live on the run as defectors presently do. Under this system, the rank-and-file members of the military and their families are suffering as much as the people.”

Identification with the “Three Main Causes” ideology is contingent upon the Tatmadaw’s ability to present itself as the only legitimate and sovereign state power. It follows that a rival body with similar claims to popular legitimacy has the ability to break large sections of rank-and-file soldiers away from their commanding officers. This helps explain the number of defections that have taken place to the various resistance forces, an estimated 2,000 soldiers and 6,000 police. These numbers are not enough to topple the regime, but neither are they insignificant. For defectors such as Captain Thuta, their ideological commitment to the idea that Min Aung Hlaing’s regime could be overthrown – combined with personal circumstances such as the absence of family living on a military base – underpins their ability to tolerate the material hardships defectors face. For others who wish to defect, the absence of a clear alternative means they see no other option but to stay within the grip of the Tatmadaw.

If such an alternative had existed in February and March – a revolutionary “government of the toiling masses” – the picture could have been much different. The isolated instances of [fraternisation](#) between workers and soldiers – such as the workers outside the Central Bank of Yangon who posed with soldiers for group photos while urging them to join CDM – could have become coordinated and more widespread. [46] Through these bodies it might have been possible to formulate appeals targeting the grievances rank-and-file soldiers feel toward their superiors: concerns over wages and conditions; the extension of democracy into their own ranks; the nationalisation of the military-

owned conglomerates under workers' control and channelling its resources into essential services for workers and the poor; and amnesty for rank-and-file soldiers for atrocities committed while following orders. Combined with mass land seizures in the countryside and the backing of the ethnic minorities, the lack of "peace" and "stability" in the borderlands, which provides justification for the Tatmadaw's ongoing operations in these areas, could be turned on its head: only the revolution could solve the perpetual conflict and bring about a just peace. Rank-and-file soldiers could have been presented a clear choice: do they commit to a corrupt, unequal and brutal state run by Min Aung Hlaing and his cronies? Or do they commit to a democratic, liberating and popular alternative organised by "the toiling masses"?

2. The absence of a revolutionary organisation.

Only a revolutionary organisation with deep roots in the working class and poor could have acted towards this end. Revolutionary organisation is not only a prerequisite for the goal of workers' power - its existence is also necessary to try to maximise the gains of partial struggles prior to that goal. During February and March there existed real potential for even small revolutionary organisations to make serious gains and play a leading role in the unfolding struggles. There were many signs that significant numbers of workers were open to revolutionary ideas; and train drivers, nurses, truck drivers, seafarers, teachers and other advanced workers were acting as a vanguard leading others in the struggle. The fact that many of these advanced workers took a lead from - or worked alongside - radical students also illustrates that a revolutionary organisation with roots among students could play an important role in such struggles. The tragedy is that all of these advanced layers were doing so spontaneously and were not united by a common political project and organisation.

A revolutionary organisation rooted in these advanced elements could have drawn on the spontaneous wave of militancy that was unleashed in February and tried to generalise from it; it could have communicated the experiences of the most advanced workers who had developed strike committees with the aim of raising every struggle to the level of the most developed; it could have linked these up through the strike committees on a local, regional and national basis; and it could have transformed the engine of revolutionary struggle into a government of the toiling masses capable of posing a direct challenge to the entire ruling class.

If these factors had existed in February and March, it is very likely that some form of compromise deal would have been struck between a section of the officer corps and the CRPH (most likely the outcome of a counter-coup carried out by middle-ranking officers under the weight of mutinies from below) in order to regain control over the situation. It is hard to predict what would follow such a move, but it is unlikely that the resulting situation would be stable. The social forces unleashed through such a process would have produced a situation of dual power: on one side, a provisional government made up of the CRPH and the officer corps claiming to represent "the people"; and on the other, a revolutionary movement with incipient organisations of self-management.

Hence, there are two senses in which the revolution would need to "grow over" from a democratic to a socialist revolution to fulfill the aspirations of the Burmese people.

Firstly, any newly installed "bureaucratic-military machine" would not be able to provide a solution to the concentration of wealth among the officer corps, state officials and their cronies. Nor would such a government be able to solve the agrarian question (land to the small farmers); nor provide a just solution to the national question. This is because challenging any of these conditions means taking on the economic and political power of the ruling class as a whole, which the officer class - even its most radical sections - will never do.

Secondly, any assault on the Burmese ruling class is also an assault on the ruling class of neighbouring China, Thailand and Singapore, and a security concern to the Indian and Bangladeshi states. Faced with a revolutionary situation in Burma, these regimes would become a regional base of counter-revolution with the backing of other imperial powers. Yet such a scenario opens up the revolutionary potential of struggles for democracy within these neighbouring regimes; only the toiling masses of the region would be able to rescue the Burmese people by launching similar assaults on their own ruling classes.

None of these tendencies were allowed to develop since the CRPH – as representative of the liberal sections of Myanmar’s ruling class and the ethnic minority leaders that aspire to join them – were able to assume political leadership over the strikes. In doing so they limited the weight of the revolutionary process through three crucial interventions. Firstly, they contained the demands of the struggle to cosmetic political reforms that failed to address the underlying social concerns motivating workers and the poor. Secondly, the sabotage of the strike committees by members of the NLD who argued these bodies could develop into a rival base of power to the CRPH. Finally, by promoting the “right to self-defence” in mid-March (after a month and a half of calling for “peaceful protest” in the face of massacres by the Tatmadaw) they helped channel widespread sentiment that Min Aung Hlaing would need to be overthrown by armed force into abandoning the struggle at the point of production for the “people’s revolutionary war”. [47] In this way the NLD and CRPH played an important role in the defeat of the extended general strike.

The strategy pursued by the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM) and the Myanmar Labour Alliance (the 16-member trade union body that launched the 8 March extended general strike) also bears responsibility for the defeat. They showed no desire to channel the creative energy from below into incipient forms of workers’ power. The unions instead asked imperial powers to place trade sanctions on the regime, which history shows savage the living conditions of the poor while leaving the rich untouched. They systematically limited their demands to what was acceptable to the CRPH, thus transforming the extended general strike into an auxiliary of the CRPH. This can be seen in the countless working-class demonstrations throughout February that were led to the offices of the United Nations, the US consulate and the International Labour Organization. [48] Despite the youth and militancy of many unions in Myanmar, which are not as bureaucratised as their Western counterparts, and despite the central role that countless working-class activists played in leading and catalysing the strike wave, the heroic movement was squandered. The dominant politics pushed by the CTUM bureaucracy blocked the path to more radical conclusions that were being drawn by sections of workers, and ensured the Tatmadaw could regain control of the situation.

The counter-revolutionary terror used to crush the extended general strike bears witness to the words of the French revolutionary Saint Just – those who make only half a revolution do no more than dig their own graves.

“Until the end of the world”

The instincts of the movement opposed to the junta are sound: the battle cry of all those who continue to resist Min Aung Hlaing’s regime – “until the end of the world” – contains within it the promise of a never-ending struggle against military rule. But the question remains: what force in society is capable of ending military rule and creating an outcome that can begin to address the vast inequalities that characterise Burmese society? This article has argued that the working class must become the leading class in the revolutionary process. This is because of the class power that arises from their position within the mass of the Burmese people: a power that arises from capitalism’s dependence upon workers to produce the goods and provide the services that keep society

functioning, and a material interest in overcoming the forms of oppression that characterise the treatment of the rural poor and ethnic minorities.

The ongoing instability that characterises Min Aung Hlaing's junta can open up the possibility for future crises and assaults upon his regime. In particular, the ongoing flash demonstrations against the regime must find a way to connect working class demands over wages, conditions, trade union rights, health, education and welfare and those related to the rural poor and ethnic minorities with the broader political goal of overthrowing the dictatorship. Similarly, those committed to advancing the position of the working class under the military dictatorship will need to break with the politics of sanctions being pursued by the CTUM bureaucracy, since it is acting as a substitute for the immensely difficult task of continuing to organise workers at the point of production.

The key task for revolutionaries in Myanmar today has to be laying the foundations for a socialist organisation that can cohere the most advanced workers into a fighting force capable of leading the mass of workers and drawing behind them the broader oppressed layers in a revolution that smashes the entire Burmese ruling class. Such an organisation will not be built overnight; nor will it be able to influence or lead mass struggles against the dictatorship in the near future. But such an organisation must be built in advance of the type of revolutionary crisis that erupted in February 2021. This type of organisation will necessarily start with small numbers of dedicated individuals convinced of the need to overthrow Burmese capitalism through a revolution led by the working class. These revolutionaries will need a high level of political clarity, in particular in relation to the disastrous effect of Stalinism and Maoism on the Burmese left, and a clear understanding of which forms of working-class organisation can give them the best chance of transforming a political revolt against military rule into a social revolution. [49]

This is because the working class are not just the gravediggers of Min Aung Hlaing's regime; they are the gravediggers of the entire social order upon which the power of the ruling class rests. In this land built with martyrs, only they can deliver on the promise: "We will not be satisfied until the end of the world".

Robert Narai

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P.S.

• Marxist Left Review:

<https://marxistleftreview.org/articles/until-the-end-of-the-world-myanmars-unfinished-revolution/>

Footnotes

[1] This song was written by Naing Myanmar during the 1988 uprising and has since been central to resistance against military rule.

[2] This article would not be possible without countless hours of conversations with revolutionaries on the ground in Myanmar. Many of the insights in this article are based on interviews I have conducted with them throughout the course of 2021, parts of which have

appeared in Red Flag. For security reasons real names cannot be used, but I would particularly like to thank Me Me Myint, Ko Ko Zaw, Thar Yar Than, Ma Su Su Wai, Phyo Moe Lwin, Z, James, Katie, Kelvin, Min Khaing Khant, Soe San, U Toke Gyi, Mena, Saw Khu Zon, Ohn Nyo, Nyi Thuta and Aung Kaung Sett. Their revolutionary spirit has been a constant source of inspiration. My correspondence with Stephen Campbell has also provided me with many insights. Omar Hassan's comments on an earlier draft have also been central to the finished piece.

[3] I use the terms Burma/Burmese and Myanmar interchangeably for the country and those who inhabit it. The former, which dates back to the last dynasty before colonial rule, derives from the majority ethnic group, the Burmans; the latter, a literary form, first appears in 12th century inscriptions. In 1989, the country's official name was changed to Myanmar by the ruling junta, with corresponding revisions for cities and ethnic groups. For more on the complex ethnic and linguistic connotations of the names see Callahan 2009a.

[4] Lwin 2021.

[5] The Irrawaddy 2021; Blazevic 2021.

[6] International Labour Organization 2021; UNDP 2021. For an account of the height of the third wave of COVID-19 in Myanmar see Narai 2021c.

[7] World Health Organisation 2021.

[8] Harkins et al, 2021.

[9] Myint 2021. For more on the impact of COVID-19 and Myanmar's healthcare system see Narai 2021c.

[10] Paddock 2021.

[11] Wai 2021.

[12] Lwin 2021.

[13] Zaw 2021. The 8, 15 and 22 general strikes were largely "spontaneous actions" called by CDM and supported by the various trade unions.

[14] In the revolutionary Marxist tradition, this process has been called "the mass strike".

[15] A number of protests pledging support for the uprising against the military took place in the refugee camps in Bangladesh over the course of February and March.

[16] Narai 2021a.

[17] Z 2021.

[18] Galache 2021. For more on the terror see Narai 2021b.

[19] Cady 1958. Galache 2020 provides an accessible overview of the diverse indigenous peoples who inhabited this region prior to British rule and the various conflicts that predated

colonisation. Importantly, it refutes the dominant idea in much official Burmese historiography that projects a pre-established harmony and fixed ethnic identities onto pre-colonial history.

[20] For a detailed account of this period see Callahan 2004.

[21] General Saw Maung, who many believe wished to hand power to the NLD in the 1990 elections, was overthrown in a palace coup in 1992 by Than Shwe's group. For an account of these struggles see Myint-U 2019, especially chapters 2 and 3.

[22] Half of Thailand's natural gas imports come from joint operations with the MOGE in the Andaman Sea.

[23] Bauer et al 2018.

[24] Jones 2014.

[25] Galache 2020, Chapter 9 and Conclusion.

[26] The first ceasefires were signed with the groups that emerged from the remnants of the Communist Party of Burma: the United Wa State Army and the Kokang Democratic Army (later renamed the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army). In return for access to natural resources in the border areas, the central lowland regime allowed them to control their own self-administered areas in northern Shan State, through which they built their own semi-independent states.

[27] Woods 2017.

[28] The best account of this history is found in Galache 2020.

[29] It is estimated that Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise has at least 7 years' worth of precautionary savings while the Myanmar Gems Enterprise has 172 years' worth. See Bauer et al 2018.

[30] In an email exchange with Stephen Campbell he has pointed out that majority of strikes against Than Shwe's military dictatorship have been undocumented and there are no readily available accounts except for oral accounts by participants given to him. However, a 2009-10 strike wave of garment workers did receive some attention from both the media, activists and researchers. And while the 2007 uprising against the previous military junta did not achieve any immediate changes, it is reasonable to suggest that the fear of similar uprisings was a factor behind the transition to civilian-military rule in 2010. For more on the 2007 uprising see Callahan 2009b.

[31] Campbell 2013.

[32] Narai 2021a.

[33] Maung 2021.

[34] Wai 2021.

[35] This includes the establishment of a new working-class newspaper known as Workers'

Journal, which is linked to the underground organising that continues.

[36] The following is based on the analysis put forward by Hein and Meyers 2021 and conversations with participants in various PDFs.

[37] Lintner 1990.

[38] Liu 2020. It should be noted that privatisation of state assets has been a persistent policy concern of NLD governments that have been repeatedly resisted by the USDP and military-appointed representatives in parliament.

[39] See Trotsky 1931.

[40] Lwin 2021.

[41] This following is based on the account given to me in Zaw 2021.

[42] Ko Ko Zaw pointed out that a number of state sector employees in Mandalay had created similar bodies; Zaw 2021. Thar Yar Than, a local militia fighter in Bago, used the term “revolutionary government” to refer to the political authority that had been established in the eastern parts of the city that was routed by security forces in the massacre of 9 April; Than 2021. For an account of the Bago massacre see Narai 2021b.

[43] Mon and Weston 2021.

[44] Lintner 2021.

[45] The following is based on correspondence in Thuta 2021.

[46] Paddock 2021.

[47] James 2021.

[48] These are well documented on the CTUM’s Facebook page throughout February and March 2021.

[49] The discussion circle that has been built around the blog Revolutionary Marxism and their recently launched publication The Struggle have made important moves in this direction. Due to the history of Stalinism and Maoism, they are allegedly the first Trotskyist group to emerge organically out of the Burmese left and, alongside attempting to develop a genuine Marxist understanding of Burmese capitalism, have made translations of a number of Trotsky’s writings available in Burmese for the first time.