



This article examines how Myanmar workers responded to the February 2021 military coup, as well as the intensification of repression and economic decline that followed. Building on strategies developed during the pandemic, labor unions and human rights organizations quickly established the Myanmar Labor Alliance. This alliance led large-scale anti-coup protests and factory strikes. The paper details the military's violent crackdowns and the severe hardships faced by workers. These hardships include the arrest and killing of union leaders; surging prices; stagnant minimum wages, which are the lowest in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and heightened labor intensity. Despite these challenges, workers' resistance endures. Since the coup, strikes have highlighted the resilience of the labor movement. For example, in May 2024, more than 6,000 garment workers at the Sioen Myanmar Garment factory in Yangon went on strike with the support of the Federation of General Workers Myanmar. The workers demanded higher wages and better working conditions and secured tangible gains despite threats from management and intimidation by the military. The interplay of political repression and economic instability underscores the vulnerability and courage of Myanmar's workers in the post-coup era.

Following the Myanmar military coup in February 2021, people in Myanmar fought against the military and workers were one of the main forces to lead the struggles. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) campaign started by medical workers on February 2 was the first move to encourage people to resist. It was spilt over to [other groups](#) such as, teachers, students, railway workers, and other government workers who are working for the Myanmar military and their linked business. Four days after the launch of the CDM movement, [workers](#) working in the garment factories took to the street chanting, “We want democracy, we don’t want the military dictatorship!” on February 6. Their participation created a momentum to enlarge the protests. By the next day, Myanmar streets were full of people demanding democracy and the release of political prisoners. It has been four years during which the plights of people have been aggravated. According to a report in 2024, Myanmar military had already killed 5,712 people and arrested nearly 28,000 people. The Myanmar military increased a lot of restrictions and made sure to hold the power in a fascist manner. It is time to look into the experiences of workers: how they have organized their resistance and how they have continued to struggle against the oppression of the state and employers under the military dictatorship.

2021 Coup: Workers Responses and Military’s Oppression

One of the reasons for workers quickly to organize a sizable mass for the protests was that they had developed a group to connect different unions and labor organizations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, from late 2019 to 2020, the employers of garment factories in Myanmar [dismissed workers](#) for the workforce reduction. Not surprisingly the majority of dismissed workers were factory-level union leaders and members. To protect against this kind of union-busting technique, trade unions and labor rights organizations formed a watchdog group to monitor the union-busting cases. The watchdog group became the organized front of Myanmar labor movement for the country’s democracy as a network when the military staged a coup in February 2021. This network of labor rights groups, later known as Myanmar Labor Alliance, quickly voiced demands for the immediate release of all political prisoners and showed their stand against the coup. Labor unions

inside factories protested in their workplaces to show solidarity with the network's demands. Workers, who had played a remarkable role and shown commitment in various historic moments including the independence and pro-democracy movements, again initiated the massive strike on 6 February 2021. Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM) and its allies played a crucial role in mobilizing the massive protests. Due to their power and capacity to organize, the unions were one of the first targets suppressed by the military. The military declared that [16 trade unions and labor organizations](#) were illegal in March 2021, and arrested union leaders inside factories. Over [300 unionists and labor activists](#) were arrested and 55 unionists were murdered.

Workers' Situation After the Military Coup

The garment sector, which was hit by both the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup, is still essential for the country's economy under the European Union's Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme which was reinstated in 2013.

In post-coup Myanmar, the garment sector has faced severe instability with the [closure of nearly 150 factories and the loss of more than 200,000 jobs](#). However, some factories remain in operation. According to the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA), there were [530 active factories](#) as of September 2023. At the same time, labor rights violations and poor working conditions have only worsened. The labor relations have reverted to authoritarianism under military rule. Employers have taken advantage of the political turmoil to oppress the workers and undermine the labor unions by siding with the military junta. Meanwhile, working conditions have been deteriorated further, and labor activism has been severely restricted under political oppression. Nevertheless, workers have continued to organize strikes and voice demands for better working conditions amidst political oppression although they violently suppressed. In some cases, the employers called the military to crack down on strikers. Therefore, some members of prominent trade unions such as FGWM went underground and continued their activities in exile while other unionists carried on working inside the country.

In this section, we discuss the new labor movement landscape in post-coup Myanmar by

exploring working conditions such as wages, working hours, gendered experiences exacerbated by the military coup, dispute resolution mechanisms, and changes in labor recruitment.

Wage

Workers have been hit hardest by economic instability, with rising prices of basic commodities and a stagnant minimum wage of 4,800 Myanmar Kyat (MMK) (approximately 1.48 USD) per day, the lowest in ASEAN countries. Workers demanded a higher minimum wage before 2020, but the process was stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup. The rapidly increasing exchange rate of the US dollar has further worsened their livelihoods. Following the coup, the sharp depreciation of currency was the major factor of raising commodity price, making the current minimum wage inadequate.

In 2023, the junta's directive mandated an additional 1,000 MMK to be added to the minimum wage. According to the Notification No. 2/2023 of the Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population under State Administration Council (SAC), a ruling body of military junta, workers at private-sector employers with more than 10 employees were entitled to minimum daily wage of 5,800 MMK (approx. 2.77 USD)—an increase of 1,000 MMK per eight-hour workday over the previous minimum wage of 4,800 MMK per day. The changes took effect on October 1, 2023. This was intended to ease the dissatisfaction of workers with the military regime. Even before the official notification, in some factories, workers successfully bargained to increase the wages to 5,600 MMK per day. After this announcement, most factories provided 5,800 MMK. However, a union leader said, “even this amount is not sufficient for workers to provide their families.” Importantly, the 1,000 MMK is not considered of the official minimum wage increase, thus, excluding from overtime calculations. Overtime pay is calculated on the statutory minimum wage of 4,800 MMK, resulting in an hourly overtime rate of 1,200 MMK (twice the base rate of 600 MMK/hour).

Even worse, some factories continue to ignore the law. And other factories offset the wage increase by cutting other benefits such as professional fees and overtime pay. With wages falling short of living costs, many workers depend on experience bonus, attendance bonus and overtime

wages. Some garment factories have withheld overtime payment, claiming workers failed to meet production targets on time. In August 2024, the regime increased the additional allowance by another 1,000 MMK—bringing it to a total of 2,000 MMK. As a result, daily wage workers now earn 6,800 MMK per day. However, overtime pay is still calculated based on the statutory minimum wage of 4,800 MMK.

Increased labor intensity and forced overtime

Although labor exploitation was common before the coup, post-coup situations have worsened. Employers have increasingly violated the employment contracts (EC) and raised the production targets to unbearable levels, resulting in forced overtime. Ma Ei, a joint secretary and central committee member of FGWM told us;

“The employers used to assign more production targets in post-coup Myanmar. In a Chinese-owned factory, workers have to meet 120-150 targets per hour, which is unbelievably high for a worker to meet. To meet the target, workers have to work overtime, which is forcibly assigned by employers. However, the employers disguised it as voluntary by forcing the workers to give consent”.

Before the coup, production targets were around 60 pieces per hour. Since the coup, factories have arbitrarily raised them.

A worker from “E&P Fashion,” a Chinese-owned garment factory, described her experience to [Myanmar Labour News](#), a local media outlet and labor right advocacy group in Myanmar;

“In our factory, we have to sew CUH-branded clothes with 100 workers. The employers required us to meet more than 100 targets per hour. Even though we are working without a rest or going to the toilet, it is impossible to meet the target. In that case, supers (leaders) shouted at us harshly.”

Similarly, [Tianjin Fashion Milestone Garment factory](#), owned by a Chinese and located in

Hlaing Thar Yar Township, presents another example of a sharp increase in production targets. The factory employs around 1,400 workers who have to work from 7:30 AM to 8:00 PM, without provided transportation for commuting. Even when workers skip toilet breaks to keep up, the target is impossible to meet. The employers also confiscate workers' cell phones and continue to violate employment contracts.

Gendered Experiences

The garment sector, employing approximately 90% women workers, has long been notorious for sexual and verbal harassment by employers, managers, leaders, and male co-workers (ILO 2018). Even before the military coup women workers faced verbal and sexual harassment during their commute to and from the workplace partly due to the lack of employer-provided transportation. Since the coup, these gendered experiences have been compounded by diminished safety and security. Ma Ei and Ma Khin, executive committee members of FGWM, explained;

“Women workers are not only harassed in the workplace but also on their way from duty station to their places and vice versa. Factory’s lack of transportation support and forced overtime, especially amidst the diminished safety and security as a result of the military coup, exacerbate the harassment.”

In addition to workplace harassment, the [military rule](#) itself– long associated with sexism and patriarchy– has perpetuated sexual exploitation of women workers. On March 25, 2023, two women workers from the No.11 Garment Factory located in Pakkhokhu, Magway Region, were raped by the soldiers and members of the Pyu Saw Htee (a military-affiliated militia group). According to [DVB News](#), these women workers were stopped at the checkpoint while returning home. The soldiers and Pyu Saw Htee members claimed that they were carrying scissors, abducted them and later assaulted them. Both workers subsequently died by suicide.

[The Ayeyarwaddy Times](#), a local new outlet, also reported that unmarried women workers from a military-owned factory located in Hlaing Thar Yar Township, Yangon, were forcibly sent to work in

the houses of the military generals in Nay Pyi Taw. One victim recounted;

“We have to do household chores that include washing and ironing their clothes. Sometimes, we have to massage them which sometimes includes sexual harassment”.

FGWM received the cases of sexual exploitation and rape cases as reported by the workers. Ma Ei and Ma Khin confirmed;

“A woman worker from a factory located in Hlaing Thar Yar, on the outskirts of Yangon, was raped on their way home. But the employers covered up the case and claimed that she had resigned.”

They further affirmed;

“In VIP (Very Impressive Prospects) factory, the Chinese employers committed sexual harassment against women workers. It happened after the coup.”

According to Ma Khin, many cases remain unreported, as employers exploit the absence of rule of law to silence victims.

Despite [the 2012 Social Security Law](#) which entitles maternity leave, miscarriage benefits, paternity leave, and related expenses, women are denied these [entitlements](#). To avoid providing them the factories prefer to recruit younger women and these women workers have to undergo pregnancy tests before and after employment. Since the military coup, the dismissal of pregnant women workers has become increasingly common.

Another gendered hardship has been the growing difficulty in affording sanitary napkins. Low wage, soaring prices for basic goods, inadequate bathrooms, and restricted toilet breaks have worsened menstrual health conditions. A woman worker told her experience on the “စက်ချုပ်သမ(Seik Choup Tha Ma)”, a local blog which documents the struggles of women workers in the garment sector as follows;

“In our factory, there are no adequate toilets. Before the coup, I changed the menstrual

pads three times a day. However, after the coup, I cannot afford to do so due to price increase and my low wages. the factory also began to limit the toilet time. When the management caught us looking for the pads, they scolded and shouted at us harshly. To avoid this, we used wasted fabrics as pads. We know that it is unhygienic but we have no other options.”

Currently, menstrual pads cost 1,500~2,000 MMK – an amount increasingly unaffordable for workers. Restricted toilet breaks and inadequate facilities also undermine women workers’ reproductive health, leading to conditions such as uterine diseases. However, the right to access to medical benefits remains denied.

In fact, these gendered struggles are not new. Women workers have long fought not only against the exploitative practices of factory management but also against patriarchal attitudes within some labor unions. In the years leading up to the military coup, some women unionists, frustrated and disillusioned with old-guard male union leaders who perpetuated gender inequality, established new labor unions—such as the Solidarity Trade Union of Myanmar (STUM).

Threat to Collective Bargaining and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

In November 2022, nearly two years after Myanmar’s military coup, the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA), the main employers’ organization in the garment sector, launched a Voluntary Labor Compliance Assessment (VLCA) tool and an accompanying grievance mechanism. The stated aim was to guarantee compliance with national labor laws among member factories. In other words, it aimed to ensure workers the rights to which they are entitled. However, labor law violations persisted in the garment sector and beyond. In January 2024, Myanmar’s parallel government, the National Unity Government (NUG), blacklisted 64 senior members of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) for cooperating with the military regime to avoid penalties for labor law violations. Among those blacklisted was MGMA secretary general Khine Khine Nwe, which evidenced that the VLCA was largely ineffectual.

However, NUG has no viable alternative to ensure labor law compliance in Myanmar factories.

Under the 2021 [Settlement of Labour Disputes Law](#), factories with more than 30 workers are required to form a Workplace Coordination Committee (WCC), consisting of two representatives each from employers and workers. The WCC is an important body to resolve disputes and facilitate collective bargaining. If the WCC fails to reach an agreement, cases can be filed to the Township Conciliation Body (TCB), then to the State or Regional Arbitration Body (AB), and ultimately to the National Arbitration Council (AC), if necessary.

Even before the coup, the dispute resolution system was not effective. Many factories failed to establish WCCs and the employers often ignored rulings such as reinstating the unjustly dismissed workers for participating in strikes. Labor activists have long argued that the penalties for violations are too small to force compliance (BSR 2017). Since the coup, genuine labor unions have not been able to operate or form. Instead, employers and management increasingly replace them with “yellow unions” or fake unions, which work in favor of the employers. The WCC are also formed with representatives from these yellow unions to create the appearance of compliance and convince foreign brands. FGWM leaders Ma Ei and Ma Khin observed;

“Employers and management are trying to replace the labor unions and form WCC with yellow unions in every factory.”

For instance, in Saung Oo Shwe Nay (Golden Sunshine) Company, which produces for H&M, MOHITO, and SMOG brands with around 1,800 workers, management sought to replace the functioning workers’ union with a yellow union. According to a unionist,

“A lot of workers’ rights violations are taking place in the factory such as breach of the employment contracts and union busting. The management ignored the workers’ demands and when the workers’ union tried to negotiate, they attempted to replace us with a yellow union by collecting workers loyal to them,”

Under the military regime, employers called in the military junta to intimidate striking workers rather than engaged in peaceful negotiation.

On June 8 2023, at Hoseng Garment in Shwe Pyi Thar Township, which produces for Index and Zara, workers organized a strike to demand an increase in the minimum wage from 4,800 MMK (2.29 USD) to 5,600 MMK (2.67 USD). Management initially agreed to negotiate but on June 10, they dismissed seven union leaders involved in the strike. On June 14, the dismissed workers were summoned to the local office of the the Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population (MOLIP) in Shwe Pyi Thar, located in an area under martial law. Instead of resolving the dispute, one of the seven dismissed workers was arrested. That same day, the workers continued the strike, demanding the reinstatement of the dismissed leaders. Management again called in the military. Video footage released by workers and published by *Myanmar Labor News*, showed a junta officer violently threatening the strikers;

“This is your choice to work in this factory, no one invited you to work in here. There is always give and take. Of course, the factory will cut your monthly wage and attendance bonus if you join the strike instead of working.”

When a worker replied;

“We don’t want any trouble. We just organized the strike to demand increased minimum wage and to reinstate the dismissed unionists.”

In response, the officer shouted at her [in a harsh and threatening tone.](#);

“Are these unionists your relatives? Know your life! Remember that this is under martial law. There is no such thing as a union under military rule.”

While FGWM continues to provide advice, support to the workers and disseminates the news by posting updates on Facebook, those who contact the union, face threats and pressure from management. The management prohibited the factory workers from contacting FGWM.

According to Ma Ei;

“Although the workers got threatened and pressured by the factory and management team, they (the factory and management team) are really afraid of our news and other labor-related

news in the media. When this news is widely spread, the authorities from the Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population department (MOLIP), conducts investigations. So, we can say there are both positive and negative impacts.”

Ko Aung Gyi from *Myanmar Labor News* also confirmed;

“When we publish violation cases on our website, the MOLIP investigates. Nevertheless, employers only allow workers who are on their side to speak to these officials. Therefore, we cannot expect good results. Employers threatened the workers who contact and report to us. And sometimes, employers try to bribe us to delete the news. In other cases, workers are forced to say the reports are fake.”

Rather than genuinely protecting workers’ rights, ministry officials investigate mainly to prevent negative publicity that could scare off investors. Employers, for their part, use yellow unions and WCCs to maintain the illusion that dispute resolution mechanisms are functioning.

Conscription and Labor

On February 12 2024, the military activated the [People’s Military Service Law](#), the conscription law, a measure dating back to the previous military regimes under General Ne Win and later amended by General Than Shwe. The law stipulates that men aged 18-35, women aged 18-27, as well as men aged 18-45, and women aged 18-35 with specialized skills, are subject to conscription. Despite these stated criteria, citizens of all ages and genders are concerned and panicked as the military junta often disregards legal provisions and acts arbitrarily. Following the enforcement of the law, overseas migration of male workers increased sharply.

According to Ko Aung Gyi of *Myanmar Labor News*, some employers have been involved in the forceful recruitment of male workers, collaborating with authorities to collect workers’ biometric data. Workers also told [Western News](#) that the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI), an organization to safeguard business interests, has been collecting the personal data of male workers and handing it over to the military.

Initially, the garment sector was unaffected as factories replaced male workers with women in positions such as cutting and packaging. However, the female labor supply has also dwindled due to low wages and fears related to the conscription law—especially 2 years after the coup. As a result, employers are now trying to retain female workers by engaging with unionists and offering wage increases. However, workers view these attempts as insincere.

Some workers see this moment as an opportunity to push for higher daily wages. Many factories under the Federation of Garment Workers Myanmar (FGWM), along with others, have begun making such demands.

“Workers from different factories are learning from each other to raise their demands. When we demand wages, one thing to be cautious about is the legal-binding issue. What employers are trying to offer is to provide additional fees as financial support to the daily wages. It is not legally binding. So employers cut the fees from the daily wages on the other hand. The factories with strong unions can organize for demanding wages in solidarity and systematically with the employment agreements.”

Case Study

Even with virtually no possibility of collective bargaining under the dismantled rule of law, workers in Myanmar continued to organize strikes until 2024 - three years after the military coup. Strikes demanding better working conditions and higher minimum wage were routinely met with dismissals, a common occurrence in every post-coup industrial action. Employers have also used threats of factory closure to suppress strikes. In many cases, employers shut down operations temporarily without compensation or notice. Nevertheless, workers never gave up as shown in the case below.

(1) Dare to Fight: Workplace Strike at Sioen Myanmar Garment

Workers at Sioen Myanmar Garment organized a workplace strike in May 2024. To better

understand how the strike was organized and what changes resulted from it, we interviewed Ma Khin Thandar Moe, who was a former union leader at the factory.

Sioen factory is owned by a Belgian company and produces its own brand, Sioen, which includes lumber jackets, hiking suits, and uniforms for US soldiers. The soldier uniforms have strict standards and require high quality. Before the coup, the factory operated with around 1,200 workers. In post-coup Myanmar, although the number has dropped to about 700 workers, the factory continues to operate, [producing approximately 35,000 pieces per month](#).

Ma Khin, a woman worker and union leader, was arrested on 24 August 2021 along with other union leaders for her involvement in the anti-junta movement and social media posts. Later, she was released and fled to the Thai-Myanmar border where she has continued her labor right activism under the Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM). [According to Myanmar Labor News](#), the factory used the political crisis to oppress workers. In 2022, three workers—including a female leader—were arrested by the SAC, for supporting the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). In February of that year 60 workers were illegally laid off. On 14 May 2024, Sioen workers began a workplace strike that lasted three and a half days, marking a bold act of resistance under repressive conditions.

(2) Mobilizing the Workers in Post-Coup Myanmar

Like many garment factories, the management of Sioen Myanmar Garment has made persistent union-busting efforts. Before the coup, the factory had an active labor union. However, following the arrest of four union leaders early in the coup, the union became largely inactive, although some union leaders remain engaged discreetly. The factory became the very first where workers' demand for an increase from 5,800 MMK to 6,800 MMK, including the additional fees, was met. Before the military coup, it was relatively easier to organize the strikes. Nowadays, it requires discretion and careful planning. In the days leading up to the strike, former union leaders held over 10 secret meetings to discuss and strategize around the demand for a 6,800 MMK minimum wage. Then, workers were informed discreetly, often during lunchtime or outside the factory premises.

Despite the risks, the former union leaders who had previous organizing experience believed that the workers would stand with them and join the strikes. And they were right. Approximately two-thirds of the workers joined the strikes on the first day by refusing to return to work and instead gathering in the dining rooms.

According to Ma Khin, the former union leader at the factory,

“Even though the labor union at the factory remained relatively inactive, former union leaders are there and influential. Most importantly, the workers at Sioen have always shown strong solidarity. The labor union was militant before the military coup and consistently led the fights for workers’ rights. That history of activism earned the workers’ trust, which was crucial in organizing this strike. In addition, workers see the demand for a higher minimum wage was a collective right.”

(3) Without WCC, How Were the Demands Addressed?

While many employers replaced genuine workers’ unions with employer-friendly yellow unions in other factories, this factory has no yellow union. From the start, workers informed the management that a labor union still existed at the factory, even though it temporarily paused its activities due to limited space for labor activism. Despite several attempts to form yellow unions by the employer, workers didn’t accept them.

Nevertheless, the employer could form a Workplace Coordination Committee (WCC). It is only a one-sided initiative by the employer, which does not represent the workers’ interests. The workers don’t recognize this WCC and instead handle the disputes directly with the employers.

To lead negotiations, the workers established their own group consisting of 10 leaders from 10 lines, who are recognized by the workers as legitimate representatives. These representatives are responsible for negotiating with the employer and ensuring workers’ compliance with employment contracts.

In addition to the demand for a minimum wage increase, workers also raised other concerns such

as expanding the dining room and setting defined lunch hours, improving toilet facilities, arranging additional buses for commuting, ensuring social security benefits, and addressing feedback submitted through the suggestion box.

The strike lasted for three and a half days, during which many workers either stayed in the dining room or refused to return to work. After this period, the employer began negotiations and agreed to increase the minimum wage to 6,800 MMK. The employer also consented to compensate workers for one and a half day wage lost during the strike. However, other demands remained unaddressed.

“One of the reasons the employer agreed to increase the minimum wage was because the Sioen factory produces its own high-quality brand. So, the employer doesn’t want to lose the current workers, who are familiar with brands’ standards and quality requirements. Hiring and training new workers would be costly” explained Ma Khin.

Before the coup, a piece of Sioen-branded clothing costs around 350,000 MMK. Each production line usually made 100 to 200 pieces daily and the factory had 10 lines in total. Ma Khin recalled, “During our first strike in August 2019 when we demanded an increase from 3,600 MMK to 4,800 MMK, the strike lasted only one day before the employer agreed.”

Additionally, the labor shortage in the country exacerbated by the conscription law and economic instability, causing many workers to migrate to neighboring countries for work, likely influenced the employer’s willingness to agree with the workers’ demands.

(4) Resistance as a Solution

The success of the Sioen strike serves as an encouraging example for other factories. Following this, several factories have begun to demand higher minimum wages. According to FGWM, some factories have achieved their demands.

Three years after the coup, skyrocketing commodity prices have severely affected workers. For instance, the price of oil costs around 17,000~18,000 MMK, while half a gallon (1.89 kg) of the lowest quality rice affordable to working-class families costs around 7,000~8,000 MMK –

significantly higher than the daily wage of 5,800 MMK.

“Personally, I believe that the oppression at the various levels have made workers strong enough to resist. They have no options left except resistance. They’ve got nothing more to lose. An important lesson we’ve learned is that when we fight in solidarity, we can achieve what we demand,” reflected Ma Khin on the overall situation.

Conclusion

The garment sector in Myanmar has become increasingly notorious for exploitative working conditions, severely worsened by the dual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup. Workers have been deeply affected by soaring prices of basic commodities, making their already precarious situation even more difficult. Despite the shrinking space for labor organizing caused by political oppression and aggressive union busting, workers continue to find ways to organize strikes and demand higher wages.

The labor regulations under the military junta, which holds the de facto power, especially in the urban areas where the factories are mainly located, fail to protect the workers’ rights. Employers exploit the ongoing political turmoil to further oppress workers.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Labor under the National Unity Government (NUG), formed by the elected leaders in the 2020 election, has been unable to offer any meaningful protection for workers’ rights since the military coup. While broader political issues have dominated attention, workers’ concerns have largely been sidelined in both NUG’s agenda and mainstream politics. As demonstrated by the case study of the Sioen strike, workers, who feel they have nothing left to lose, see organizing strikes as the only means to defend their labor rights when neither the current labor regulations under the military junta nor the NUG government can provide adequate protections. Against all odds, workers in Myanmar continue to courageously organize labor strikes to assert their rights.

〈초록〉

역경을 딛고 선 저항: 쿠데타 이후 미얀마 노동자들의 투쟁

Ma Cheria and Ko Maung

이 글은 2021년 2월 군사 쿠데타 이후 강화된 군부의 탄압과 날로 악화하는 경제 상황에서 미얀마 노동자들이 어떻게 대응했는지를 분석한다. 미얀마 노동조합과 인권 단체들은 팬데믹 기간 이용했던 전략을 바탕으로 재빠르게 미얀마노동자연맹(Myanmar Labor Alliance)을 결성하였고, 이후 대규모 반쿠데타 시위와 공장 파업을 주도했다. 이 글은 군부의 폭력적인 탄압과 경제 악화에 따른 복합적 위기 상황에서 미얀마의 노동자들과 노동운동이 직면하고 있는 어려움을 노동 현장의 실태를 중심으로 설명한다. 여기에는 노동조합 지도자들의 체포와 살해, 급격히 상승한 물가, 아세안 회원국 가운데 가장 낮을 뿐만 아니라 2018년 이래 정체된 최저임금, 노동 강도의 증가 등이 포함된다. 이처럼 어려운 상황에도 노동자들의 저항은 지속되고 있다. 특히 쿠데타 이후 4년 간의 파업 사례는 미얀마의 노동운동이 지닌 회복력을 보여준다. 2024년 5월 미얀마일반노조연맹(FGWM)의 지원 아래 6천여 명의 이상의 의류 노동자들이 파업에 나선 양곤의 Sioen Myanmar Garment 공장 파업은 그 대표적인 사례이다. 이들은 임금 인상과 근로 조건 개선을 요구했으며, 관리층의 위협과 군부의 협박에도 불구하고 실질적인 개선을 달성해냈다. 이처럼 쿠데타 이후의 정치적 탄압과 경제적 불안정이 복합적으로 작용하는 상황에서도 미얀마 노동자들은 용기를 잃지 않고 있다.

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필자

Ma Cheria

노동운동, 이주 노동, 사회적 재생산 노동을 중심으로 연구하는 미얀마 출신 연구자이다. 현재는 태국 치앙마 이대학 <사회과학과지속가능발전을위한지역센터(Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development)>에서 태국에 거주하는 미얀마 출신 여성 이주노동자의 무급 돌봄노동, 가사노동 등 재생산 노동(reproductive labor)에 관한 연구를 진행하고 있다. 석사학위논문으로 “Special Needs for Women Workers in the Garment Sector of Myanmar: Analyzing Labor Policies Through a Critical Realist Lens”가 있으며, 다양한 매체에 미얀마의 여성노동자, 농민, 노동운동 등에 관한 글을 기고해 왔다.

Ko Maung

태국에 거주하고 있는 미얀마 출신 독립 연구자이다. 2019년부터 미얀마 노동자들의 투쟁에 관한 연구를 진행하고, 관련 글을 기고하고 있다. 현재는 미얀마 내의 농오자 조직과 노동운동 관련 활동을 하고 있다. 최근 기고문으로 “Myanmar’s Spring Revolution: A History from Below”, “Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win: Workers’ Resistance since the Coup” 등이, 공저 논문으로 “Workers’ Self-Organisation under Military Rule: Challenges and Opportunity in Post-Coup Myanmar (*Third World Quarterly*, 2024)” 등이 있다.

발행일자

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