

ECONOMIC COLLAPSE, SURVIVAL AND RESISTANCE IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

MARCH 2022



The Myanmar
Project collective

A30/



Researchers'
Republic

Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

About the authors: This report is the result of the work of an entire team, a collaboration between members of three organizations: The Myanmar Project Collective, A30/ (Article 30) and Researchers' Republic. Some researchers worked on the entire report, others contributed research on specific sections.

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About Researchers' Republic: We are a team of about a dozen researchers from across Myanmar, led by our director, May Zin Thaw, who founded the organization in 2016. Many of us have worked together for a number of years. Most of us are still based inside Myanmar, and some of us have left the country since the military coup of February 1st, 2021. Our aim is to document the situation in Myanmar, and put it in perspective, looking into the past, not just the present, and with the future in mind. We believe that almost every aspect of life has been made so much worse by the coup and the criminal and exploitative nature of the military regime. But we also believe that it is important to see that the situation was already difficult, for the people and for the environment, long before the coup. We also believe that the democracy movement and the people of Myanmar can identify solutions today, and when democracy returns to Myanmar. That day cannot come soon enough! Our work has a strong focus on northern Myanmar, and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. It focuses particularly on issues of climate change, the environment, land rights, labor rights, business and human rights, natural resources management, drugs, health, education, conflict, displacement, and gender.

About the Project: This paper is the second in a series produced by Researchers' Republic and A30/, in collaboration with The Myanmar Project Collective, a network of reporters who document the post-coup events across the country from the ground. Their curated work can be followed and supported on Visual Rebellion Myanmar, a platform for Burmese photographers, filmmakers and artists. It was funded by the United States Institute of Peace.

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INTRODUCTION



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup d'état and sent the country into a tailspin.

Early that morning, soldiers seized control of all State institutions and arrested State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint in their official residences in Myanmar's capital, Naypyitaw. Other senior members and local politicians associated with the National League for Democracy (NLD) were detained in unknown locations. The military began to hunt those known for their pro-democracy stances and activities, many of whom had to hide or flee to the territories of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs).

Members of the two chambers of Parliament, who had gathered in the capital for the first time precisely that day to elect a new President and two Vice-Presidents, refused to accept the military take-over. On Wednesday, 3 February, they formed the Committee Representing the People's Hluttaw (CRPH). These MPs, too, had to go into hiding or exile within days of the coup. The name and logo of this new institution, which was immediately made illegal by the junta, would become the symbol of the uprising, alongside the portraits of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and U Win Myint and the flag of the NLD. They remain so today.

Civil servants, too, refused to accept the new regime. Tens of thousands of them immediately ceased work and committed themselves to what soon became known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Internet and social media platforms became a vibrant space where millions of users decried

the coup: what many saw as not only the end of a period of democratization but also the death of hope.

Every night at 8 pm, virtually every street of every city and town in Myanmar rang with banging pots and pans for 15 minutes or more. The seemingly spontaneous movement inspired by the tradition of chasing away evil spirits lasted for weeks and months.

Workers, too, organized under the leadership of unionists who had spent the last few years developing a growing and increasingly assertive labor rights movement. By the end of the week, a broad mobilization manifested in widespread strikes and protests across the country.

The youth, in particular, the now famed “Generation Z,” took to the streets in droves. The demonstrations were a melting pot of people from all walks of life. The gatherings were fervent, but also joyous, festive, and frankly a beautiful show of protest against the military and support for democracy. The yellow hats of workers; the white hats of engineers; homemade t-shirts and posters in support of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint; the three-finger salute – popularized by The Hunger Games movies and a common signature of the pro-democracy movement in Thailand, and later in Hong Kong and other countries in Southeast Asia (the so-called Milk Tea Alliance), the imagery conveyed a collective and unequivocal desire to continue Myanmar’s imperfect transition.

There was no justification for the coup. All analysts agree that the elections of November 2020 were free and fair and its results beyond any doubt – notwithstanding the quarter of parliamentary seats reserved for the military under the 2008 Constitution. The coup promised nothing but to pull the country back into the pits of military rule.

The anti-coup movement was unphased by the junta’s initial threats and flexing. Then on 19 February 2021, the tone changed. Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, a supermarket worker and peaceful protestor, was shot in the back of the head by a senior policeman two days before her 20th birthday. With this, the junta went on the offensive. Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing was the first of well over 1,400 civilians killed by the junta in 2021, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

Many more were killed as they joined the movement of armed resistance that followed. As repression turned violent, the size and the looks of the protests changed dramatically. Large protests became rarer, but violence was ever-present. Barricades were built, torn down by the police, and rebuilt within an hour. Some demonstrators brandished makeshift weapons and protection. Most took to the streets with nothing but a facemask to escape identification, but also because all of this played out amid a raging global pandemic.

As clashes carried on, thousands of protesters turned to organized armed resistance. People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) were created across the country. Unable to match the force

of the junta, these PDFs employed guerilla tactics. Attacks on crony businesses and infrastructure and public assassinations of officials associated with the junta became commonplace.

A number of factories, Chinese-owned factories, in particular, were burned to the ground. This led to violent crackdowns and appeals from the Chinese government, which was already on high alert due to large protests in front of its Yangon Embassy. Indeed, for millions of people in Myanmar, China was, and remains to be, the lifeline that sustains the junta.

At the end of March, the CRPH, which had already abolished the 2008 Constitution, published a Federal Democracy Charter, endorsed by a broad coalition of CDM groups, trade unions, civil society organizations, and EAOs, under the newly formed National Unity Consultative Committee (NUCC). Last but not least, in mid-April 2021, a National Unity Government (NUG) was formed, with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and U Win Myint placed symbolically at its head. Functioning underground and from exile, the NUG has become the leading institution of “the spring revolution.”

In a matter of months, the junta induced an extensive collapse of the economy. The SAC’s protracting reign also brought about a drastic reduction in the provision of public services. On the ground was a distinct sense that Myanmar had returned to the dark days of dictatorship. Civil war, which had never ceased in many ethnic areas, returned to areas, including in the main cities, which had not seen it since the days of the communist parties rising after Independence.

Notable foreign companies and investors exited the country. Schools closed since the early months of 2020 due to COVID-19, did not reopen until November 2021. Even then, only some did, with or without pupils. As waves of COVID-19 gripped the country, few could access healthcare. The internet was no longer safe to use. Communication became difficult and dangerous.

A banking crisis further contributed to widespread unemployment and rising living costs. Commodity costs increased, and crop prices decreased, forcing farmers to take on unmanageable debt and sell their land. Informal settlements expanded in the cities, and people took great risks and incurred significant losses to survive. Formal protection systems were dismantled or coopted. The Myanmar kyat went from 1,300 in US dollars at the end of January 2021 to around 2,000 as of December 2021. According to the World Bank, the economy is expected to have contracted by around 18 percent in 2021. All the while, the SAC focused on actively hunting down their opponents.

These statistics and headlines are striking, but they do little to depict the realities on the ground. It is one thing to know that the economy shrunk dramatically. It is another to hear the story of a small shop owner who lost everything and had to deal with loan sharks to feed

her family, or to hear about a family trying to care for their sick child with no access to health care, or whose young kids are home alone with no school as both parents have no choice but to go to work. Beyond unemployment numbers, it is important to hear from a garment worker who lost her job and now has to engage in hazardous labor on the streets.

This report is about the coup and economic collapse as it is playing out on the ground – as it is being experienced by ordinary people in post-coup Myanmar. It is a report about lived suffering. It is also a report about survival and resistance. It is about people who suffered under decades of military rule, then experienced the mixed emotions of a pacted transition, then faced the wrath of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and who are now not only enduring but overcoming the coup d'état and all of its consequences.

The stories in this report are worth telling for themselves. But they are also revelatory. They offer insights into what is happening on the ground and why. They can serve to guide stakeholders towards new opportunities and better responses. To this end, our examination of lived experiences in post-coup Myanmar steered us to three key messages:

First, in order to fully understand the situation in post-coup Myanmar, one needs to give due consideration to the realities before the coup. Myanmar's pacted transition did bring about hope. Myanmar experienced unprecedented economic growth, and this did bring about better employment opportunities for some, particularly in cities. But inequalities also mushroomed.

The pacted transition elevated elites but left many behind. This was at least partly because since the start of economic liberalization in the early 1990s, but especially since 2011, all ruling parties, including the NLD, favored pro-growth strategies and policies over ones that are pro-poor and inclusive.

Outside of a small cohort of workers, most of whom were manufacturing goods for foreign brands, and even among them, the Myanmar working class remained vulnerable to all sorts of abuses and deprived of basic labor rights and social protections, at home or abroad. Unionists were targeted and repressed throughout Myanmar's liberalization. Farmers, too, suffered both before the transition in 2011, and in many cases, even more so after it started. Land rights were threatened in new ways. So-called "ethnic" areas were left even more at the margins of "development" or were the victims of one-sided "development" plans conjured without consulting affected communities.

Few ordinary, working-class people in Myanmar reaped the benefits of liberalization. On the contrary, many among the masses could not keep pace with new expenses and pressures. This left millions of people indebted and less ready to face external shocks, be they natural disasters, inflation, conflict, a pandemic, or a coup.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, global brands triggered force majeure clauses, effectively

passing their burdens and expenses down the supply chains. Suppliers then made similar moves. Ultimately, the most marginalized populations ended up shouldering impossible costs and conditions.

The pacted transition and the pandemic left ordinary people in Myanmar in a situation where they had to overcome extraordinary challenges just to survive. This was the unfortunate reality before the coup.

Second, while it remains critical to support the democracy movement, including the NUG and all the forces of progress associated with it, the world will need to go further to support and galvanize the vast majority of Myanmar's population in the midst of protracting military rule.

It did not take long for people in Myanmar to ascertain that they were on their own. Ordinary people and communities rallied support for the most vulnerable, grassroots civil society developed parallel education and healthcare responses, people began to document human rights violations, workers fled across borders in search of opportunities that would enable them to send home vital remittances, and communities began to resurrect informal systems of protection and welfare.

Since the coup, global stakeholders have had few answers beyond sanctions and shaming. As the world faces the prospect of protracted military rule in Myanmar, the world is forced to juggle different priorities and possibilities – priorities and possibilities that may be at odds with one another.

By default, efforts to strangle the junta have a very real impact on ordinary people (even though many may support the strategy). As the crisis extends, isolation will become increasingly insufficient as a stand-alone strategy, and its consequences will become more compounded on the most vulnerable populations.

The world has to find ways to galvanize grassroots actors in post-coup Myanmar. This is not only about keeping people alive, though that is a very real imperative at the moment. This is about putting local communities in the best possible position to resist, rise above and catalyze local change.

Yes, local civil society actors are prevented from formally organizing and functioning. But this is nothing new to grassroots organizers and organizations in Myanmar. They have decades of experience working underground and informally. They know how to hide in plain sight and navigate local politics and relationships. These grassroots actors are not easily accessible, but they are reachable and potent.

Grassroots actors and activities have become local lifelines in post-coup Myanmar. But their efforts transcend survival. Remittances, village rotating funds and community sharing

programs not only keep people fed; they enable opportunities and create leverage. In post-coup Myanmar, cash has significant political capital. Temples, churches, and mosques are regularly key sites of support and mobilization. Ad-hoc events and initiatives not only fulfill immediate needs; they build capacity and lay the groundwork for future organizing.

There is no shortage of opportunities to directly and tangibly impact the situation on the ground – the stories in this report make that clear. If the world is to keep step with the situation on the ground, the world will have to do more than decry the situation from afar. The world will have to engage, get creative and informal, and help local actors transform the new realities that they face.

Third, this moment of crisis is also a moment to envision a better future for Myanmar.

The many people we interviewed, as well as our local analysts, pointed to a future that features not only elections and a return to democracy (and the design of a federal system) but also strategies and policies that are distinctly pro-poor, inclusive, and sustainable.

When Myanmar returns to a state of transition, whether through revolution or another pacted scheme, the powers that be cannot resort to the pro-growth, pro-rich reforms started by the Thein Sein administration and assumed by the NLD. This is a moment to imagine a future for Myanmar that does not come at the expense of the poor and the planet.



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

A DECADE OF STRUGGLE IN THANDWE MARKET, RAKHINE STATE

August 2021 // Surviving a fire, a court case, Covid-19 and the coup d'etat: Two women vendors recall a decade of struggle in Thandwe market, Rakhine state.

For decades, the people who depend on the market have had to overcome a series of catastrophes. They've had no choice but to pile up unsustainable levels of debt. In the absence of safety nets, every economic, environmental, and political shock has pushed them further into desperation.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

Khin Thandar, 31, is a woman who spends her days at the market. She has done so since she was young. People call her a "daughter of the market" and she is known, loved and trusted. She started working as a sales staff at the market on the day she finished her matriculation exam at 16 years old until she was 21.

She gained a lot of experience in how to run a business while working at different stores, such as an electronics accessories shop. "But I could not afford to open my own shop because my family was poor and my brother was in Grade 10, preparing for a matriculation exam, so it cost a lot of money," she said.

Then her sister sold her gold for 7 lakhs MMK, and she was able to open a small grocery store. She promised to pay it back when she was able to. But ten days after she started her business, one morning of February 2012, at around 4 am, the iron of one sewer set the whole market on fire. "By the time I heard about the fire, the market was gone, only ashes were

left," she said. Fortunately, as soon as her brother and his friends found out about the fire, they hurried to move her goods to the school.

For a year, a temporary market was opened before a new market was built. The new location had about a thousand selling booths. Most booths were bought straight away by wealthy shopkeepers.

About 40 people, including Khin Thandar, had to rebuy their shop in installments by drawing loans. She had to give 240,000 MMKs to the government as a first-time payment. She then had to pay 800,000 MMKs of monthly installment. As she was working to reopen her shop, she was designated as a money collector for the local Su Mae (collective saving) system.[1]

"I had no money when I had to pay the 240,000 MMK, so I prayed that I would win the money this turn," she said. Her prayers were answered. She drew the lucky number and received 250,000 MMK from 25 people of the Su Mae group.

She could now open and expand her grocery store. She rented out her small shop to another person for 10,000 MMK and moved into a two-room shop that she rented for 80,000 MMK. It was 2013, during the Thein Sein period, and she was doing well enough to repay the gold debt to her sister and provide for her brother, who was now studying at the University of Distance Education.

She did not own her house, so she had to pay for accommodation. Then, the elderly man who owned the house asked her to buy it for 25 lakhs MMK, as he needed money to go to Yangon for medical treatment. Khin Thandar had been renting the house for about four years and didn't want to move out. "I told my friend I would like to stay in the house. She told me that she would buy the house for me, and I could pay her back whenever I was able. I was so grateful that she helped me buy the house."

In 2015, Khin Thandar married a junior officer at the Irrawaddy Bank, who earned a low salary of only around 1 lakh MMK. She was now struggling to provide for her household's

[1] Su Mae, translated as "collecting votes," is a collective saving system where five to ten people contribute 1000 to 2,000 MMK a day into a box. One person is chosen to monitor the use of the funds. Khin Thandar was the ready-made candidate to manage the money and enforce the rules. She made sure that everyone paid in a timely manner, collected the money, and at the end of the month, she would organize a draw among all the members. The person who picks the lucky number can take the whole amount of money saved by everyone during the month. If ten people contribute 1,000 MMK per day, this person will take home 3 lakhs MMK and will then be able to start a small business or buy goods in bulk. The person who drew the lucky number still has to contribute their share until the end of the round, which depends on the number of people involved. Only when all the people have won a full month of collective saving is one round of Su Mae complete.

socio-economic needs with the profit she made from her shop. She had to make up for her husband's low salary, pay Su Mae money, and pay off her debt for the house.

"Real estate prices skyrocketed while I was trying to repay my debt in installments. My friend, who sold me back the house in installments, asked for more money, and I had to pay 50 lakhs in installments," she said. During the inflation, she increased the rent of her first shop from 10,000 MMK to 20,000 MMK, as her new shop rent increased from 80,000 MMK to 150,000 MMKs per month. She could not afford it anymore, so she moved to a smaller shop with a lower price of 70,000 MMK. After she won money from the Su Mae system a second time, she decided to open a clothing store. Selling dry goods was not very profitable anymore, so she had to try something new.

In 2016, under the NLD government, Khin Thandar traveled to Yangon to buy clothes with a small amount of cash. "I started with 65 lakhs. I got back more than 20 lakhs in one week. It sold very well. I made back the initial capital within a month," she said.

When she was selling dry goods in the market, she made a daily profit of around 10,000 MMK from 100,000 MMK in sales. 100,000 kyats of sales in clothes yielded two to three times as much profit. "My business was much better in the NLD era, doing more than double, and we were able to save more money. Some days, I managed to make 50,000 MMK to 60,000 MMK profit!"

As Khin Thandar became more comfortable selling clothes, she expanded the Su Mae network to include 12 other vendors, each contributing 30,000 MMK a day. She was chosen again as the trusted umpire and kept the savings with her.

One of the vendors drew the lucky number, so she was entitled to get the money collected by the network over a month. But then this vendor stopped contributing her daily share, as every member is supposed to do until the end of the round, whenever they win the pot. As she was afraid that others would not trust her anymore, Khin Thandar chose to pay this vendor's share until the end of the round. In order to cover the "bad payer" share as well as her own, she had to borrow money from a broker.

"My husband's salary was 270,000 MMK at the time. It was entirely spent to pay interest on our home loans and my contributions to the Su Mae group. So I had to borrow 20 lakhs MMK to continue paying for the bad-faith woman and an additional 200,000 MMK every month in interest to the broker." Khin Thandar decided to file a lawsuit in court because the other vendor was ignoring her pleas, and she could not sustain the costs.

At the same time, the birth of her first baby was approaching, and she had to take a short leave. "I had no money to give birth to a child, so I told my brother to go sell my earrings. I could only go to the hospital when I got the money from selling those earrings," she said with tears in her eyes.

During her maternity term, the family had to survive solely on her husband's salary. "On top of the 200,000 kyats in interest every month, I have to pay the cost of a lawyer for the court proceedings as well as the costs of my household. So I had to borrow money again to cover all those costs," she said.

When her baby was born, she contracted TB, so she had to borrow even more money to treat her daughter. "With the help of my husband's friends, my daughter finally received medical treatment," she cried out.

As they could not repay the loan of 20 lakhs MMK and could not pay the 200,000 MMK monthly interest, her creditor confiscated her house, and she had to rent another one.

Khin Thandar had to deal with the case relating to Su Mae for almost a year, and when the case was about to be finalized, the other vendor finally paid her 20 lakhs MMK and requested that she close the case. Khin Thandar did not want to close the case, but her lawyer advised her to as there was no way that she could continue to cover the costs.

When the first Covid-19 wave hit Thandwe in June 2020, the market closed for four months. She had to quit her job and sell all her remaining clothes at a discount to cover some of her debts. She cooked and sold food at the market when it reopened between the two waves. During this period, she did anything she could to cover her debts as they compounded, along with the stress.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

Before the coup, commodity prices had stabilized, and she began to make a decent profit selling cooked rice. Despite the looming presence of Covid-19, she began to gain hope. When the coup occurred, that changed. All basic items immediately became more expensive.

Successive Covid-19 outbreaks reduced the number of people who came to the market. Khin Thandar watched her profits at the food shop dwindle. "A bottle of cooking oil used to cost 2,200 MMK, but now it costs about 2,500 MMK. Before the coup, I could make 6000 MMK, but now it's a good day if I take home 3000 MMK."

She continued to scrape by until the market closed after the third wave of Covid-19 infections were discovered on June 24th, 2021, in the sea-town. Then the Rakhine National League (ULA) and the Arakan Army (AA) announced a stay-at-home order from July 20th to August 25th.

"I was very upset when the Township Committee told me that the market would be closed. I still had to pay my debts. I still had to pay rent, which recently increased. I was very frustrated thinking about how to deal with this," she said.

She cannot afford to pay for electricity anymore and is struggling more than ever. "I want these political problems and epidemics to end. Then I would be able to work and solve my problems," she said.

She is currently trying to carry on with the help of a friend, who asked her to cook Rakhine food to resell in Yangon. She receives about 4,000 MMK a day. It is the only option she has left.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

Khin Moe Moe, 40, is a sewer in the Dwaravati Myoma market. She makes shirts, pants, pillows, etc., bespoke for customers and charges a different tailoring fee for each request. She lives in a friend's house. She comes from a village nearby, an hour and a half from Thandwe. Khin Moe Moe supports six family members in the village. Her assistance enables

them to buy essential items: rice, oil and salt.

In Thandwe, the monthly rent for a house is between 20,000 MMK and 400,000 MMK. Khin Moe Moe pays her friend 20,000 MMK for accommodation. Before the coup, her average daily income was around 15,000 MMK and around 450,000 MMK a month. Commodity prices were stable enough that she could generate an income and save money.

"I didn't need much money for myself. I send all the money I earn to my relatives in the village," she said.

The four-month closure of the market during the first Covid-19 wave was the first big challenge. She took her sewing machines from the market and started making clothes at home.

However, very few people considered tailoring during that period. Now, she was struggling to cover her living expenses and found it nearly impossible to support her family in the village.

Although the market was closed, she still had to pay full rent for the shop, which was 40,000 MMKs per month.

After the coup, the economy continuously slowed, and local people were more focused on buying food than conveniences like tailoring. "There are not many people thinking about sewing clothes. Some days I receive about 5,000 MMK, and other days there is no income at all."

In addition to losing her regular income, Khin Moe Moe watched as commodity prices soared. She could no longer sustain herself and had to borrow money from her friends to support herself and her family members. Then the market closed again due to the third Covid-19 wave. Some people came to her home to give her work, but people couldn't pay the proper fees. "I sewed more than 20 pairs of baby pants, but I got only 2,000 kyats," she said.

She has no money left. Her debts have been steadily rising and are now close to 50 lakhs MMK. "When the political situation is stable, and the pandemic is over, I will have a chance to sew more clothes and pay off my debts," she said.

On September 1st, 2021, the Dwaravati Myoma Market reopened with limited hours – 6 am to 1 pm. In the past, the market was bustling from sunrise to sunset, from 6 am to 6 pm. Now, the market is a bleak scene of people scrambling to survive and find hope for the future.

REALITIES BEFORE THE COUP

No human rights & no justice in our lives!
We have no work and are suppressed.
There is no justice here.
We are hungry but have nothing to eat.
We are the victims!

We are poor and without a chance.
Lower class, Lower class, Lower class!
We live in a selfish system.
Lower class, Lower class, Lower class!

Song 'Lower Class' from the album 'Puppet Society' by the band "Rebel Riot" (2012)

Myanmar's economic woes started long before the recent military coup. Long before colonization, "pre-colonial" Myanmar was characterized by a feudal system where the King, and at a more local level the "myo-za," as well as the Shan Sawbwas (princes) and other "big men" at the helm of a local fiefdom, ruled by tyranny and exploitation. This legacy was carried forward by the British colonizers, military rulers, and business cronies after them. It is no coincidence that the military used the education system to popularize myths about the benevolent past Kings of Myanmar.

As the monarchy was replaced by an Empire, the British proved that exploitation could be made more systematic and rule even more oppressive. The local economy was turned into an extractive machine built for the benefit of a country, oceans away. The student movement, starting in 1920, the Saya San farmers' revolt, the birth of the unionist movement, and that of the communist party, all indicated hostility between the working class and the ruling elites: a hostility that was on display in 1988 and now in the post-coup uprising.

As the people of Myanmar struggled for Independence, the line between exploitation and oppression, on the one hand, and survival and resistance, on the other hand, was relatively clear. There were the British and those allied with them on one side and the forces of freedom on the other. This line was blurred when the military took power in 1962 and took the country on a "Burmese Way to Socialism." Beyond the near destruction of the economy, one lasting consequence of the 26 years of Ne Win's rule, between 1962 and 1988, is the deep-seated wariness of the people of Myanmar towards State intervention in the economy. This legacy made adopting pro-poor policies more difficult during Myanmar's

recent economic liberalization.

The “first” economic opening of the early 1990s made clear that liberalization, when it takes the form of crony capitalism and oligarchy, does not lead to development that benefits the poor. On the opposite, their exploitation, and that of the environment, and natural resources, became much worse. For two decades, forced labor, the appropriation of land and resources, human rights abuses and displacement linked to the building of infrastructures, from factories to roads and dams, became ubiquitous.

The decade-long pacted transition continued the country down this same path.

In March 2011, Myanmar’s first elected government was formed. Led by retired military general turned President Thein Sein, a small team of ministers, civil servants and advisors launched a series of political, economic and administrative reforms. In particular, they endeavored to better connect Myanmar to the international community and attract foreign direct investments. Under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government (2011–2015), the GDP growth rate increased from 5.35% in 2010 to 8.5% in 2013.

After winning a supermajority in the 2015 general election, the NLD appointed Htin Kyaw as the first president with no military ties since the 1962 coup d’état. Under that NLD-led government (2015–2020), the GDP growth rate slowed slightly, fluctuating between 7% in 2015 to 5.8 in 2016, 6.4% in 2017, and 6.8% in 2018 before plummeting to 1.7% in 2019 and -10% in 2020 as a result of the pandemic.

These numbers, however, only tell part of the story. The looming presence of the military in every aspect of the political economy, combined with pro-growth strategies under both USDP and NLD administrations, meant that the benefits of liberalization were not shared by all.

Pro-growth strategies, also known as “trickle-down development,” developed in the 1950s and 1960s, imply a vertical, downward flow of benefits from the wealthy to the poor: the rich re-investing their gains into the economy and spending more money which naturally creates opportunities for those less wealthy. This development theory is widely discredited, as it has not worked as intended across the world, and not least in the developing world.

Significant income inequality between the rich and the poor remained because successive governments favored pro-growth instead of pro-poor efforts. While Myanmar experienced unprecedented economic growth during the decade-long pacted transition, the inequalities between well-off, predominantly urban households and poorer, mostly rural, households, and a new class of urban poor, also mushroomed.

The UN’s 2017 Poverty Report provided a snapshot of Myanmar’s growth: “The share of the population in Myanmar living in poverty has halved from 48.2 percent in 2005 to 24.8

percent in 2017.” However, the report also revealed, “that poverty in 2017 is strongly correlated with where one lives: rural inhabitants in Myanmar are 2.7 times more likely to be poor than urban inhabitants.” Throughout liberalization, poverty remained overwhelmingly rural, with 87 percent of the poor living in farms and villages. Further, many of those people who rose above the national poverty line of 1,590 kyats per adult per day (in 2017) remained near-poor meaning that any unanticipated shocks to income or welfare, such as an illness of a relative, pests attacking crops or a natural disaster, have the potential to drive them back under the poverty line.

This dynamic, where development leaves behind those who need it most, is not unique to Myanmar. Indeed, it plays out time and time again, and it can almost always be traced back to the absence of pro-poor strategies and policies.



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

PRO-GROWTH, NOT PRO-POOR

The USDP government focused on macro-economic indicators such as growth in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which created growth but did little to lift up the most impoverished households and townships of the country.

The “Framework for Economic and Social Reforms” (FESR) formulated in 2011, the USDP’s twenty-year national development plan, laid out eight measures for poverty alleviation. However, the lack of a reliable social protection system made any attempt at reducing social inequality all but irrelevant. Anti-poverty initiatives were spread across different Ministries without proper coordination or funding. There was duplication, fragmentation, and incoherence. The USDP’s economic reforms resulted in robust growth in certain sectors, namely services, manufacturing and construction. But the agricultural sector, where the majority of the poor (and the population) are found, saw very little development and investment. 70 percent of Myanmar’s people live in rural areas and depend solely on agriculture and remittances for their livelihood. While Myanmar’s GDP grew, farmers lacked crucial financial and human capital to improve their productivity. As impoverished families faced new expenses and pressures, they often did so alone, forced to rely on themselves and their informal networks.

“Normally, we get loans from the Agricultural Development Bank, but that money only comes after the harvest, so we have to go to private banks and loan sharks,” said one farmer. Government banks increased their loan offerings, but according to various studies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), only 16 percent of rural households benefited from formal financial services because few could provide evidence of land ownership. The rest relied on friends, family, and moneylenders charging 10 to 20 percent interest rates.

After being elected to Parliament, the NLD government offered a twelve-point economic policy agenda covering a broad range of economic issues and targeting specific goals around infrastructure and job creation. The overall objective was to achieve ‘national reconciliation, balanced development, skilled human capital, and a people-centered economic system.’ In 2016, another significant economic reform came in the Myanmar Investment Law, and implementation rules followed in March 2017. Then, in 2018, a Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP, 2018-2023) was adopted, that was seen by many as a step in the right direction. However, during its four-year tenure, the NLD encountered substantial delays and hurdles and proved unable to deliver on promises of inclusive or equity-oriented policies. Analysts pointed to an apparent fear that such policies could result in lower FDI commitments and inflows. Importantly, the conditions under which the NLD had to function were in many ways impossible. They constantly fought with the Tatmadaw over economic reforms, major state-owned enterprises remained under military or crony capture, and the State was a bureaucratic mess. This context cannot be understated, but it does not

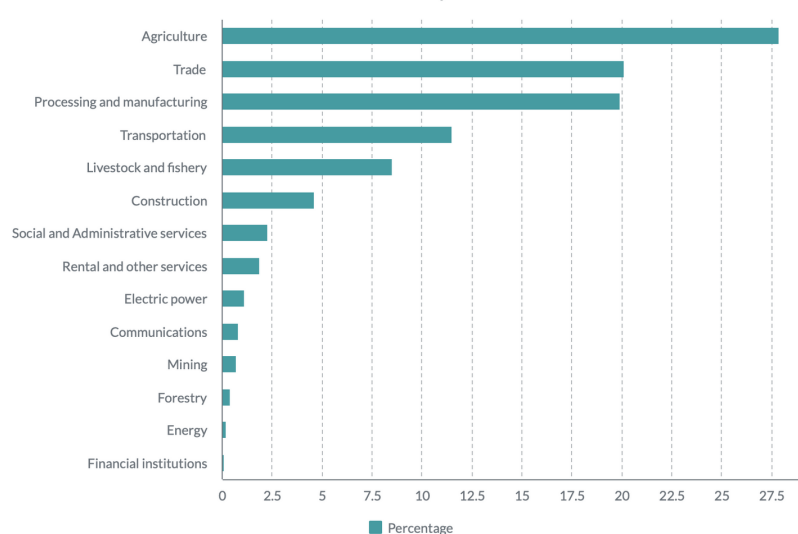
change the reality that the shift towards more inclusive, equitable policies did not occur.

After taking office in 2016, the programmatic agenda of Suu Kyi's NLD plotted market liberalization, foreign investment, and individual moral revival as the primary paths to a more 'democratic' Myanmar, largely ignoring the dire inequality and economic injustices caused by decades of military dictatorship. Job creation for the working class was not sufficient, and millions of citizens continued to leave to neighboring countries in search of work.

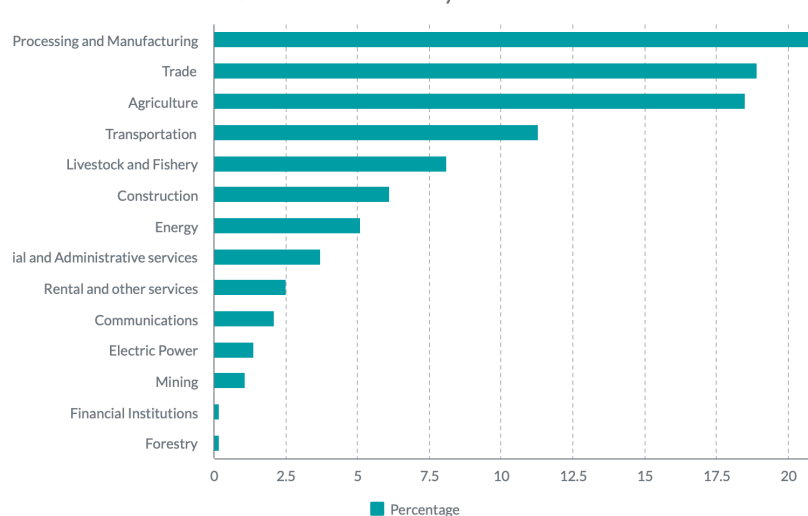
The NLD's economic policy described in the party's twelve-point agenda was based on five main priorities: fiscal prudence, lean and efficient government, revitalizing agriculture, monetary and fiscal stability, and functioning infrastructure. Clearly, the NLD's economic reforms intended to pave the way for a market economy.

While the NLD government did not make a full leap towards a social protection system, they did produce a National Social Protection Strategic Plan. While the plan never got off the ground (and here, the military coup is clearly a culprit), they implemented one of the elements in the form of a new pension scheme. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement announced a monthly pension of MMK 10,000 to the elderly aged 85 and above every three months beginning in 2019. Unfortunately, according to the WHO, the average

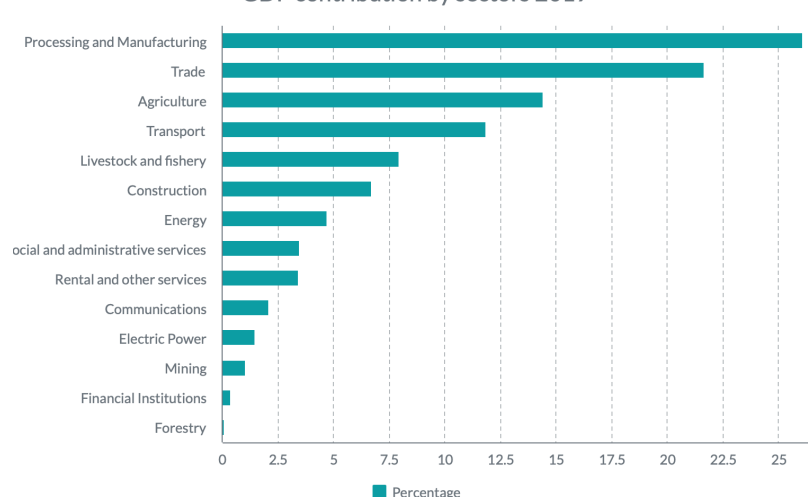
GDP contributions by sectors 2010



GDP contributions by sectors 2015



GDP contribution by sectors 2019



life expectancy in Myanmar was 67 in 2019.

Pro-poor strategies seemed lacking where they were needed most during the NLD's tenure – in agriculture. For example, an agriculture policy made loans up to 500 lakhs MMK available to those who owned 50 acres of land. But 80 percent of farm holders in Myanmar owned less than 10 acres. Only a small fraction of the most well-off farmers could meet such criteria. Agricultural research and extension were grossly underfunded and excessively focused on maximizing crop yields. Critical issues, such as cost of production, profitability, pests and diseases, water management, overall farm income, and suitability to agro-ecological zones, were all but ignored. Despite being the biggest employer in Myanmar, employing about half of the country's labor force in 2020, the agricultural sector remained the lowest contributor to the country's GDP.

All in all, neither the USDP nor the NLD-led governments heeded the message of local economist U Aung Ko Ko: "Reforming the economy is about being inclusive of all classes in society. Even though we are seeing more shopping centers and urban development in some cities, this lifestyle is out of reach for the grassroots."

LABOR RIGHTS BEFORE THE COUP

During the decades under military rule and isolation from the world, workers had next to no hope of exercising their labor rights. This would have to change to attract international business and investment.

From 2011 to the coup, economic liberalization efforts included extensive talk of labor legislation reform. This reform was critical to promoting foreign direct investment and international integration and as an answer to the subsequent shift from agriculture-based livelihoods in rural areas to wage employment in the service and manufacturing sectors in cities.

In 2020, the US\$4.6 billion garment sector was the largest export industry in Myanmar. The manufacturing sector, including the garment, footwear, and textile industry, employed more than 700,000 workers. They were primarily domestic migrants from poor rural areas of Myanmar, and notably, from communities from the Irrawaddy plains and delta, who lost everything during the cyclone Nargis in 2008. A few years later, answering the call of hundreds of export-oriented companies offering better pay and safer, stable jobs, these workers flocked to informal settlements around mushrooming low-cost production hubs, and particularly Hlaing Thar Yar, which became Yangon's Wild West.

In 2011, the Labour Organization Law, and in 2012, the Settlement of Labour Disputes Law, were enacted – a first attempt to regulate this massive shift in the socioeconomic landscape. Under the Organisation Law, trade unions were registered, and federations and confederations were established.[2] Before the coup, there were 2,876 registered unions at the workplace, township, state and regional levels. They could finally push for higher wages, worker voice, improved workplace standards, and expansion of coverage by social security. These groups all had a very important role in resolving labor disputes inside factories and pushing for the implementation of labor laws, though there were still loopholes left to oppress workers and target unionists under the legal framework.

The Settlement Law established a tripartite system for dispute settlements between workers, labor organizations and employers. However, many workers remained reluctant to pursue formal hearings with the relevant Township Conciliation Body or Regional and National Arbitration Bodies. There was hesitancy to initiate cases that could not be settled within their workplaces. Particularly during the early days of Myanmar's transition, there was much

[2]Ye Yint Khant Maung: "A New Way for Workers' Rights Beyond the Legal Framework: The All Burma Federation of Trade Unions," Tea Circle, 14 October 2019 (<https://teacircleoxford.com/2019/10/14/a-new-way-for-workers-rights-beyond-the-legal-framework-the-all-burma-federation-of-trade-unions/>)

skepticism and little trust in institutions that had long been vehicles of oppression. There were also issues related to limited stakeholder capacity and popular perceptions that these mechanisms were pro-employer, especially at the national level.

Piyamal Pichaiwongse, ILO deputy representative for Myanmar, explains:

"The military regime back in 2011 established the Labour Organization Law as part of its announced reform plan towards disciplined and flourishing democracy. Having this law in place signalled to international investors that Myanmar was serious in its reform intentions, as the rights to freedom of association is indeed one of the indicators of democracy; and an environment that is considered as conducive for investment. The military regime back then also made a commitment to end forced labour in a time bound fashion (by 2015). But in 2015, most of the activities that were agreed upon in the forced labor elimination program that required military commitment were not done, unfortunately. Up until before the military takeover, the ILO remained not able to say that forced labour in Myanmar had come to end. Freedom of association continues to be difficult to enforce. It is true that we might not be able to expect everything to be perfect overnight (pre-military takeover), but it is fair to say that certain changes for the better should be expected to happen in a given timeframe. We need to see some indications that things have moved in the right direction, though slowly. With military takeover, it in effect has brought about major disruption to the ongoing work that everyone put much energy into for some years. The Labour Organization Law requires that trade union registration is controlled by Ministry of Labour. Pre-military takeover workers and employers were yet to build full trust and respect towards one another. The building of a new profile - which is more rights-based with good governance principles integrated was the work in progress for employers. This again was disrupted by the military takeover."

According to "From the Rice Paddy to the Industrial Park" a LIFT report released in October 2021, *"union leaders continued to face discriminatory treatment by employers and trade union activity in many industrial zones and Special Economic Zones has encountered fierce resistance and suppression from employers and police. To attract this foreign investment and facilitate cross-border trade, the Myanmar government has developed several investor and business-friendly Special Economic Zones, creating an abundance of low-paying jobs that have exerted downward pressure on the wages of Myanmar's workers."*

Following mass worker protests in 2013, Myanmar introduced the Minimum Wages Act, and in 2015, its first requirements. According to a LIFT survey conducted in 2020, the law was relatively well followed, as three out of four workers received at least the minimum wage of MMK 4,800 (US\$3) or more per 8 hours working day, and the average wage for low-skilled work was MMK 8,300 (US\$6) per day. But it stipulated that a new rate will be set every two years, and there has only been one increase since then.

Ba Maung, one of the union leaders from Gasan Apparel factory in Yangon, explained: *"When our legal rights were violated, and we were oppressed and exploited by our employers, we turned to collective bargaining and sometimes protested. Before the coup, I*

participated in protests with various tactics to fight for our full rights. We organized three big strikes in 2018, 2019 and 2020 during which we picketed in front of the factory. In 2018 and 2020, we protested to address labor rights violations. In 2019, we protested because a foreigner sexually abused one of our female colleagues. When the political situation was stable, we also protested 13 times inside the factory by refusing to work and just sitting on the floor wearing headbands."

This working-class empowerment needs to be put into perspective. 84 percent of workers are still part of the informal sector, are employed without legal work arrangements, and produce goods and services for the domestic market. Only one percent of the labor force is part of a union, and that one percent is almost entirely employed in manufacturing jobs in Yangon's industrial zones where foreign business interests demand formalization. Women in Myanmar are more likely to be a member of a worker organization than men because they represent 80 percent of the workforce in the manufacturing sector.

In Mae Sot, Thailand, where hundreds of thousands of Myanmar people came to escape destitution in their own country for decades, workers' organizations have had a hard time fighting for their rights to be respected as foreign migrants. Ko Sai, one union leader established in the trader town, explains: "They came here as workers, so employment, income and legal registration are the main issues for them. Some big factories pay the official minimum wage of 315 baht per day set by the state. But in small factories, they cannot pay the full 315 baht, so they arrange accommodation near their factories and pay from 180 to 250 baht without deducting for electric bill and water bill. Usually, workers from well-established firms in the agricultural sector only receive from 100 baht to 160 baht. Only two food-processing factories near Mae Sot paid up to 180 baht daily wages."



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

Outside of a small cohort of workers, most of whom were manufacturing goods for foreign brands, and often even among them, the Myanmar working class remained vulnerable to abuses and deprived of any basic labor rights and social protections at home or abroad throughout the transition. They experienced:

- A lack of protective equipment, compensation payment mechanisms during economic slowdowns or social protection coverage, as informal sector workers are excluded from compulsory registration.
- Chronic physical and psychological harassment (sexual and otherwise).
- Squalid living-conditions.
- A lack of childcare support.
- Women faced a wage gap, as they were consistently paid less – from half to a quarter less – than men across all sectors of employment.
- Child labor as domestic help in wealthy households or in factories, fields, workshops and restaurants. According to the International Labor Organization, 1.13 million children aged 5 to 17 years, or 9.3 percent of Myanmar's child population, were involved in labor in June 2019, and over 600,000 of them are engaged in hazardous work.
- 'Wage theft,' debt-bondage, violation of the laws on leave and on working hours in the fishing or garment sector, with workers commonly reporting working 11 to 15 hours per day without sufficient breaks.
- Forced labor, which is defined by 'involuntary work under threat or menace of penalty'

Khun Piyamal explains the scale of exacting forced labor from civilians in Myanmar, which is facilitated by British colonial laws that were not repealed after independence:

"Since the 1940's, people had to provide free labour in order to suit the agenda of the military. The Town Act, 1907 and the Village Act, 1908 made it legally possible for the military to demand labour from the people without having to consider any wages or the willingness on the part of the people. The ILO in 1998 received extensive reports on the use of forced labour by Myanmar military, the Commission of Inquiry was established to examine the situation. The COI confirmed the pervasive practice of forced labour across Myanmar and made a set of recommendations to the Myanmar authorities. Myanmar back then continued to deny the recommendations. Under article 33 of the ILO Constitution provides that "in the event of any Member failing to carry out within the time specified the recommendations, if any, contained in the report of the Commission of Inquiry , the Governing Body may recommend to the Conference such action as it may deem wise and expedient to secure compliance therewith". Article 33 was invoked for the first time in the ILO history for the forced labour cases in Myanmar, when the Governing Body then asked the International Labour Conference to take measures to ensure Myanmar ends the use of forced labour. The said laws were only repealed in 2013, when the reform process started. It would be good to remind that the ILO Commission of inquiry made three major recommendations as follow:

a) that the legislation to brought with the Convention without further delay, at the very latest by 1 May 1999;

b) that the actual practice ending forced labour or compulsory labour be imposed by the

authorities, in particular the military; and

c) that the penalties which may be imposed for the exaction of forced labour be strictly enforced, with thorough investigation, prosecution, and adequate punishment of those found guilty.

The ILO reached an agreement (the Supplementary Understanding or the SU) with the Military government back in 2007 to operate a complaints mechanism, and this complaints mechanism started to operate since 2007 and continued to renew on yearly basis until 2018, at such time that the Government informed the ILO that it has established its own National Complaints Mechanism (NCM). Since 2019 the number of complaints received by the ILO declined. It is unclear if the lower number of complaints received by the ILO was because most complaints were submitted directly to the Government back then or the practice of forced labour literally declined. In any case, the transition from the Supplementary Understanding Forced Labour Complaints Mechanism to the NCM was disrupted by the Military takeover in the beginning of 2021.

Since the military takeover, there has been a rise in reported instances of forced labour. These reports are from trade unions, civil society organizations and UN agencies. Most of these organizations received training on monitoring and reporting on forced labour by the ILO in previous years."

In addition to the forced labor demands of the military, civilians all over the country face forced labor demands from EAOs and local elites. In 2019 alone, the ILO received 64 complaints that met the definition of forced labor, the majority of which related to underage recruitment.

THE STORY OF THE ILO IN MYANMAR

"With good monitoring system after series of training, the Office have been informed regularly on incidents of forced labour and any forms of threats and intimidation. The information arrived to the Office almost instantaneously after the incident took place. We were able to ring to Ministry of Labour (before the military takeover) to report the incident. The quick action made it very effective, in that it informed the perpetrator that monitoring was effective. For the people when they were in dire situation, they would think there is nothing to lose, but to start addressing the issue. In regions such as Magway, incidents of forced labour were regularly reported. When victims reported or submitted their complaints of forced labour, their action was not seen in a good light by the military back then. Sometime victims' actions were perceived as being political driven. That was a narrative back between 2007 to 2012. The ILO learnt about how much fear people faced when having to deal with forced labour orders, and what could be a practical ways to guide them to overcome those fear and yet gain respect from authorities. We see it in overall term as a process of reconciliation between the forced labour victims and local perpetrators."

– Piyamal Pichaiwongse, ILO deputy representative for Myanmar, describing the struggle to mobilize workers under military rule to overcome fear of forced labour.

1998: The ILO Commission of Inquiry (COI) was denied entry to Myanmar so it collected testimonies from victims who lived outside of Myanmar such as from refugees in Thailand. The COI report reveals widespread and systematic use of forced labour in Myanmar. The Village Act and Town Act then allowed the systematic practice of forced labour and should be repealed.

1996 COI was established and 1998 it published its report: The COI report was not recognized by the Myanmar government back in 1998, claiming instead that it was made up of fake data invented by people who didn't like the regime. This led to the ILO invoking Article 33 first time in its history.

1999: the International Labour Conference passed a resolution in view of the Government's failure to take the necessary action to implement the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry, as follows:

1. The Government of Myanmar should cease to benefit from any technical cooperation or assistance from the ILO, except for the purpose of direct assistance to implement immediately the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry.

2. The Government of Myanmar should not receive any invitation to attend meetings, symposia and seminars organized by the ILO, except meetings that have the sole purpose of securing immediate and full compliance with the said recommendations.

The ILO office in Myanmar was required by the International Labour Conference to report to the Governing Body on any progress on the elimination of forced labour three times a year.

2002: The ILO Governing Body adopted a decision requesting Myanmar as a member country to agree to the appointment of an ILO Liaison Officer in Myanmar not later than June 2002 with the functions cover all activities relevant to forced labour.

2006: Two activists who facilitated sharing information on forced labour with the ILO were given a life sentence in prison in one case, and in the other case, the death penalty. The Governing Body decided to defer the question of an advisory opinion by the ICJ on the understanding that the necessary question or questions would continue to be studied and prepared by the Office, in consultation with the constituents and using the necessary legal expertise, to be available at any time that might be necessary.

2007: The ILO and Myanmar agreed to put in place a complaints mechanism with provisions of victim protection and guarantee for the ILO to have unimpeded access to victims without having to seek permission from the Government in advance.

2012: From 2007 to 2018 the Supplementary Understanding on Complaints Mechanism was extended annually. The Governing Body decided to remove restriction on Technical Cooperation against Myanmar allowing ILO Office to provide technical assistance to Myanmar constituents in all ILO technical areas. But Governing Body continued to require ILO Office to report on progress on the elimination of forced labour, impact on investment in Myanmar, and progress on freedom of association.

2018: The ILO signed its first Decent Work Country Program (DWCP) with its constituents in Myanmar (including Government, employers and workers' representatives). The Government expressed its intention to establish its own National Complaints Mechanism on Forced Labour. The DWCP was developed to assist Myanmar to meet its commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) before 2030 with three priority areas:

- To generate employment and decent work as well as sustainable entrepreneurship opportunities to all, including for vulnerable populations affected by conflict and disaster;
- To strengthen the application of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work through improved labour market governance. The ILO's long-standing work for the elimination of forced labour will remain a core component of the DWCP;
- To progressively extend social protection coverage especially for vulnerable workers and populations and develop a comprehensive national system for occupational safety and health.

Post-Coup: Piyamal Pichaiwongse, ILO deputy representative for Myanmar, summarizes the ILO's experience since the coup:

"The Workers' Group in the ILO advocates for a total sanction against Myanmar. The ILO office will be guided by the decision of the Governing Body. Decent work Country Programme continues to operate until September 2022, adjustments to the programme were made to comply with the UN principle of engagement and any works related to policy has been put on hold. Visa and banking issues have been major obstacles faced not only by the ILO, but other UN agencies. Many trade unions, particularly their executives are subject to many forms of intimidation. For example, CTUM executive committee members were issued with arrest warrants, their passports were cancelled, the leader of MICS-TUf was arrested and remain incommunicado until now. Some unions' members were arrested and shortly after died. The ILO Governing Body reports of March, June and November 2021 outline the situation in detail."



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

COVID 19: THE BEGINNING OF A TAILSPIN

Despite economic and international liberalization, labor relations in Myanmar remained patently predatory, and the situation has worsened since the first wave of Covid-19 hit Myanmar in late March 2020.[3]

According to the LIFT report “From the Rice Paddy to the Industrial Park,” released in October 2021, but based on research conducted before the coup, 73 percent of low-skilled workers suffered from some reduction in income during COVID-19, and 43 percent lost their jobs entirely. Workers in hospitality (42 percent), manufacturing (38 percent) and construction (38 percent) were the most likely to have lost their whole income. The Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association reported that garment factories experienced a 75 percent decline in orders as a result of supply chain disruptions with China and Covid-19 related cancellations of orders from major markets and that 70 percent of 240 factories interviewed closed as they had no orders. The scene in Myanmar played out the same way it did across the world. Global brands triggered force majeure clauses, effectively passing their burdens and expenses down the supply chains. Suppliers then made similar moves.

Ultimately, the most marginalized populations ended up shouldering impossible costs and conditions. The impact of the pandemic had deep economic, gendered and cultural dimensions. The Democratic Voice of Burma published the findings of an NGO, which remained anonymous to safely continue their work in the country, that conducted interviews with 500 female workers who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. “As many as one third of all former garment workers are turning to sex work as a way to meet the ever-pressing need for cash, food, and hygiene supplies. The garment sector’s decrease by 31 percent pushed women to diversify their income, with sex work and construction among the top alternatives.”

In October 2020, The Guardian interviewed some former garment workers forced into sex work by destitution:

“When Hla, 19, tried to go back to work seven months ago after having a baby, there were no jobs. Hundreds of garment factories in Myanmar had closed after western fashion brands cancelled orders due to the pandemic, leaving thousands of women jobless. As lockdown gripped Yangon, her marriage broke down, her husband left, and her father had to sell his trishaw—no longer able to take passengers in the city. Her parents and baby were hungry. Five months ago, she became a sex worker. ‘I feel very scared,’ she says. ‘Since I’m always working in the dark, I try to be careful. I do this with my family in mind, thinking about how I’m going to feed them.’”

[3] Ye Yint Khant Maung, Factory workers suffer blame and pain in Myanmar’s COVID-19 response, Frontier Myanmar, 3 June 2020 (<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/factory-workers-suffer-blame-and-pain-in-myanmars-covid-19-response>)

After the Guardian article was published, some workers and union representatives opposed the story's frame and asserted that there are also many garment workers who returned to work as farmers in their home villages. On her Facebook page, an unnamed workers' rights activist described this article as "insulting for us [Myanmar garment workers]."

A recent report from the Center for Global Workers' Rights (CGWR), *Unpaid Billions*, exposed the systemic nature of the offloading that played out in Myanmar's garment sector:

"Suppliers around the world told the same essential story: beginning in March [2020], many leading apparel corporations began reneging on their financial obligations to the factories that make their clothes ... CGWR and the WRC [Worker Rights Consortium] estimate that buyers, in the initial weeks of the crisis, reneged on their financial commitments on roughly USD 40 billion in orders— with devastating implications for suppliers and workers. In Bangladesh alone, more than one million workers were adversely affected, with many being sent home from work without severance or furlough pay."

In the absence of a mechanism capable of governing employers, some foreign and local employers simply vanished during the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving thousands of workers to wake up with no job and no wage. As for the union leaders, they were the first to be laid-off and the last to be rehired between lockdowns. Factory owners used Covid-19 as a weapon to oppress the unionists,[4] to arbitrarily dismiss workers' leaders and to disband unions. They also closed factories without offering sufficient or even any compensation. Before the coup, the minimum wage increase was the main demand, but it was rejected by employers and the government, who justified it by economic slowdown due to the pandemic.

As many informal workers didn't meet the eligibility requirements, very few received food rations and even less benefited from cash transfers. The loss of income coupled with a lack of savings, hygiene supplies, personal protective equipment, and knowledge regarding COVID-19 put households in urban informal settlements in a desperate situation.

The lockdown had a huge impact on people who rely on markets, which were temporarily closed during each wave, especially in rural areas that NGOs cannot access easily, as seen in box one, above. Additionally, the closure of borders sent hundreds of thousands of farmers who rely on exporting their goods in neighboring countries into destitution, as explained by a resident from Shan state:

"The border closure with China due to Covid-19 was really fast. Now we cannot go there, and Chinese traders cannot come to us. There are checkpoints everywhere to make sure people follow the Covid-19 restrictions. People struggle; the situation is very, very bad. A lot of workers lost their jobs on the other side due to border closure, and there are no jobs on our side. We cannot work freely, cross the border

[4] Ye Ying Khant Maung, "COVID-19 Weaponized Against Unionists in Myanmar", Tea Circle, 9 July 2020 (<https://teacircleoxford.com/2020/07/09/covid-19-weaponized-against-unionists-in-myanmar/>)

or engage in any activity. Farmers and traders face such difficulties. Trade also changed. One of my relatives used to export corn from Lashio to Muse to be traded to China. Now, the trade has inverted, from Muse back to Lashio to try to send them to Thailand, but the price has come down a lot. It's the same problem with onion and garlic, some could not be traded, some already expired. So, the people who used to work as daily laborers in the cornfields try to go to Thailand, but the border is also officially closed, so quite a few have been arrested for illegal crossing and deported back here. The daily workers who used to carry loads at the markets are also struggling because of the on and off closure of the markets. The products from China are still available in the shops here, so they closed the border to people while still letting their goods pass to Myanmar. But all prices of commodities have increased, doubled on average, because of the special arrangements, which have to be made, in this period for cross-border trade. All of this has a huge impact on the general public here."

Meanwhile, Chinese e-commerce has expanded dramatically during COVID-19. The year 2021 saw sales through Tik-Tok's online platform increase by over 660%, as COVID-19 impacted traditional sales channels (抖音电商发布国货发展年度报告 _ 经济参考网 _ 新华社《经济参考报》官方网站 (jjckb.cn)). Across Southeast Asia, Chinese traders built new e-commerce platforms, and leveraging Tik Tok, Dewu, WeChat and other online trading platforms not accessible to local traders, cornered markets on a range of Southeast Asian goods. While quantitative data on how the Myanmar coup impacted this trend is not available, it is clear that Chinese traders have another advantage when it comes to transporting goods from Myanmar back to China, as they are much more familiar with how to navigate the new and complex COVID-19 restrictions on trade that have been established by the Chinese border authorities.

The resident from Lashio, Shan State, also mentioned the worsening conditions for migrant workers from his community in the border town of Ruili: *"In China, our workers faced oppression and abuses from the local employers, who cut wages and then refused to pay salary for months. They went to work there before the pandemic, lost their jobs and then got stuck there without an income and no way to come back."*

Despite those stories making the rounds in markets and households, people never stopped trying to cross the border. *"People don't have jobs here; they have to find a new one. If they don't, they don't have anything to eat. They have to take the risk. So, they pay a driver from 3 to 5 lakhs MMK to drive them at Laukkai, which is the place for illegal crossing. The driver will bring them to the border and there will be one person who will help them cross the border for a sum of money. This happened when they closed the passage by the river. Afterwards, China started building a permanent wall with Myanmar, and people can't even cross illegally by land either now. People don't have anything to do here, on our side."*

The same situation transpired in Mae Sot, in northwest Thailand, where hundreds of

thousands of Myanmar migrants worked and lived for decades. Ko Sai, a labour rights activist, saw the diaspora dwindling: *"Before Covid-19, there were more than 100,000 documented migrant workers in Mae Sot. Since Covid-19, a lot of workers have lost their work, and therefore, their legal status. Their passports, visas and work permits expired. According to the department of workers, the number went down to 30,000. That was before the coup."*

Less than a month after Thailand closed its borders in March 2020, long lines of Myanmar migrant workers formed in front of daily food donation booths in Koh Phangan, Phuket, or Chiang Mai, tourist hotspots that rely heavily on foreign workforces. In May 2021, Bangkok sealed off more than 400 camps around construction sites and forcibly quarantined an estimated 80,000 migrant workers and their families inside their dormitories. Most of the camps were guarded by police and the army, who made sure no one was able to go in or out. Families were left on their own without income or official help for weeks and had to rely on food and hygiene products donations from volunteer groups.



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

Back in Yangon, a lottery ticket seller explained how the situation became tenfold worse on February 1st as people were simultaneously hit by political, economic and health shocks without any safety net except for street-level solidarity: *"I currently don't have any income since most people boycott lottery tickets sold by the government since the coup. Though I get support from my children, we had to shrink the expenses by more than half since the COVID-19 and the coup. The only option I have right now is to buy the cheapest food I can get in the market to survive. I don't get any support from the organizations, but the people around my neighborhood look after each other, so I sometimes get rice from them."*

LEARNING FROM THE TRANSITION AND PANDEMIC

The past decade, notable for the pacted transition and the COVID-19 pandemic, holds important lessons for the future of Myanmar. The most obvious lesson is that Myanmar needs pro-poor strategies and policies. These can take many forms: massive investment in education (a movement the NLD government had initiated); a marked improvement in access to health services; a viable social protection system; support for formal and informal micro, small and medium enterprises (SME); easier access to credit; strengthening labor unions and farmer collectives; targeted initiatives to reduce child labor; or efforts to improve Myanmar's population's benefits from the extraction of natural resources. The latter is the largest source of revenues for the state, of which the total amount is mired in secrecy, though, according to the latest EITI Report, the extractive sector accounted for 4.8 percent of Gross Domestic Production (GDP), 5.2 percent of State revenue and 35 percent of total exports in 2017-2018.

For all this to work, daily wages for the working class need to be raised, something the NLD was reluctant to do, listening to the voices of business leaders rather than to those of the majority of their electorate. Wage increases are critical but insufficient. The last decade has also highlighted the need for holistic social protection policies that supplement the existing social security system with a broader scheme of assistance and new institutional mechanisms to replace the previous fragmented system led by disparate actors and agencies. Over the last decade, government spending on social protection remained markedly low and overly focused on formal sector workers. Despite significant economic growth, the majority of the population, particularly the poor and vulnerable, had no access to predictable social protection.

The agricultural sector needs particular attention. Despite attempts at reform, farmers continued to face delays in financial support, low productivity and minimal flow of FDI. The Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB) struggled to deliver loans at the right time before the farmers planted rice. The last decade also revealed substantial strategy and policy gaps in relation to smallholder farmers, agriculture infrastructure, seed technology, fertilizer use, irrigation strategies and mechanizations, and environmental protection.

During the transition, Ministers eyed trickle-down growth indicators and numbers while the gap between the rural poor and the relatively well-off urban population expanded. The gap grew in terms of access to job opportunities, education, health and other services. It grew and deepened throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and on the day of the February 1st coup d'état, the poor, in their tens of millions, were left on their own. A local analyst concludes: *"The most suitable economic model for Myanmar would be inclusive and based on pro-poor growth. Since the coup, Myanmar's small middle-class has begun to gradually disappear, and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening rapidly. People have established*

many family-type small businesses to sustain since the coup. So, the NUG must be prepared to prioritize the development of the SME sector. Now more than ever, the NUG must be ready to deal with economic injustice and class divisions."



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

LIVING THE COUP AND ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

The coup brought about insecurity in every facet of life. Stories from informal day laborers in Yangon, CDM teachers and market vendors in Shwedaung, farmers in central and upper Burma and cross-border traders in Lashio, provide a glimpse of what it has been like to live through a coup and the ongoing economic collapse.

According to the World Bank Economic Monitor, the coup and a third wave of COVID-19 combined to bring an economy that had already been weakened by the pandemic in 2020 close to collapse. A full political breakdown, a banking crisis, and an exodus of a cohort of foreign companies and investors combined to shrink the economy by 18 percent by October 2021. The IMF forecasts a -0.1 percent growth rate for Myanmar in 2022. The kyat dropped 60 percent in a matter of weeks. These statistics do not begin to capture the realities of widespread unemployment, unmanageable living costs, increased basic products costs paired with decreased crop prices, the breakdown of protection systems, the expansion of informal settlements, and the looming presence of a junta State that stands ready to pounce whether provoked or not.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

THE CDM ECONOMY

In the first days of the anti-coup protests, people expressed their outrage on handwritten cardboard signs, mostly in Burmese. At the end of February, pictures of millions of people across the country holding the same placards with the same messages in English made the front page of newspapers: "Free Our Leaders" / "No Re-Election" / "We will never forgive you" / "Justice for Myanmar" / "Down with military dictatorship" / "Please save our Leader - Future - Hope" on a red and yellow picture of AUNG MYE SWE / "We need US and EU to Help Us" / "How many dead for the UN to take action?" / "Please don't shoot us" / "Stop arresting people at night" / "Get out dictator" / "Civil Disobedience Movement - Time to Resist - Stand Together."

A young protest leader from Shwedaung township explains how this protest material was financed and produced: *"In Shwedaung, activists, civil servants from different departments and Generation Z youths have protested against the coup every day since February 8th. They didn't receive any financial support for the protest material, so they sought donations from the local people. This enabled them to buy banners, posters and safety equipment. Food, boxes of rice and bottles of water were given to the protesters as they marched in front of houses. Later, people were more afraid to donate because of the heightened risk of being arrested. So, organizers arranged everything themselves and used their own money to continue the strike. The total cost of the protest for a month was about 25 lakhs MMK. 12 lakhs MMK were donated, and the rest of the money came from us. We had to pawn our motorcycles, for example, to cover the costs of our protests."*



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

In March, the protest leader had to stop his efforts as the military identified him and tried to arrest him. He is now living in an EAO controlled territory and has joined the armed revolt against the SAC regime, like thousands of youths who formed PDFs all across the country.

The NUG, which was largely formed by the NLD and representatives of ethnic minorities and anti-regime protest groups in April, established three ways to fund the revolutionary movement: lottery ticket sales, bonds and voluntary tax. On 22 November 2021, the NUG launched the platform with the aim of raising US\$1 billion from interest-free two-year bonds valued at \$100, \$500, \$1,000 and \$5,000. Each investor is given a secret ID to hide their identity for security reasons.

Shwedaung city is a NLD stronghold and home to a large number of civil servants, who have had to shift to the agricultural, garment or food selling sectors to survive after they were fired for taking part in a general strike. One of those civil servants, a teacher, involved in the CDM, explains: *"We had to sell some of our items to fend off our financial problems. Together with my husband, we made 3 lakhs MMK per month. We both lost our income because of his involvement in the CDM. We were not paid enough when we were teachers, but now without salary, we are struggling more than ever. A local support organization for CDM workers gave us 25,000 MMK in May and June. I now sell some Burmese fruits and vegetables online, and our family of five members has to survive on 4,000 MMK per day."*

After the NUG was formed, the CDM Success Committee was established to support striking workers. According to U Kyaw Ni, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Labour, who was interviewed by our team in October 2021, stated, *"it has supported over 25,000 lakhs to over 30,000 CDM workers up to now. Due to a small amount of funding, the ministries can only support people in a dire emergency. Over one thousand CDM workers in the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population have received financial help."*

Almost 410,000 civil servants have joined the movement, refusing to work under the junta, according to the NUG. In mid-August and early September, the NUG ran a Spring Lottery tickets sale, of which 70% of revenues were planned to support CDM workers. More than 200,000 ticket orders were made, but many of the payments were canceled because of logistical and safety reasons. The actual sales only managed to support around 5,800 striking staff. Cash was too little and too slow to arrive, and the harassment of local CDM officials made any safe redistribution via the networks of the political opposition very difficult.

In Shwedaung, charity groups and online private donations remain the main sources of support for striking workers as the main protest leaders of the town, including Kyaw Zeya, a local politician who long stood against military rule, and Hla Thwin, who served as chairman of the Shwedaung Township Election Committee in the 2020 poll, were arrested a month after the coup. The latter is now in hiding with his family after his release. In the early evening of March 21st, soldiers and police raided the home of an NLD supporter, following

the tip of a pro-junta source, and fired shots as they couldn't find her. Around 11 pm, residents of the town were frightened by the sound of more than forty artillery shells that were fired by the military on the outskirts of town. From that night, continuous gunshots rocked Shwedaung, plunging the residents into a living nightmare and a state of constant paranoia. Such episodes of intimidation have occurred in most opposition strongholds, with soldiers threatening to rape the women and enslave the men over loudspeakers if they don't stop protesting and building barricades.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

On 22 September, two CDM teachers from Shwedaung and a man involved in what they describe as “the revolution” were arrested and are currently being prosecuted under Section 505 (a). This has happened to hundreds of employees from the Ministry of Education who have been charged or convicted under the penal code article that criminalizes “*those who provoke or intend to provoke fear, spread false news, or directly or indirectly agitate a criminal offense against a government employee.*” Hundreds of rectors, lecturers and teachers, as well as journalists, influencers, doctors, activists and civil servants, are being targeted under this new provision, which comes with a maximum sentence of three years in

prison if found guilty. They are not being targeted reactively. They are being hunted. Door-to-door searches have forced many teachers, civil servants, and other public figures to go into hiding.

Along with the repression came expropriation. In every corner of the country, lands and houses owned by people accused of collaborating with local PDFs were seized and sealed off by the military. This expropriation has been formalized and legalized under the Unlawful Associations Act, a law of colonial provenance that states that properties connected to the political opposition can be taken over by the government.

Back in Shwedaung, strict restrictions on movement were slightly eased at the end of October. But locals recognize such moves as a trick to pacify people, according to a journalist in our team: *"It is a temporary way to deceive the people in order for the military council to retain its power. In the long term, people fear that the current economic downfall will be more severe than any crisis before. They fear that under this military dictatorship, they will face constant threats, unexpected gunshots, arrests and raids will be the norm, and people will have to struggle every day to avoid starvation."*

AN INTERVIEW WITH U KYAW NI MINISTRY OF LABOR FOR NUG

The following is a collection of excerpts from an interview with the NUG's Minister of Labor U Kyaw Ni, a.k.a U Kyaw Kyaw, by two of the co-authors to this report.

"I want the International Community to recognize NUG as the legitimate government of Myanmar and to establish government-to-government relations and diplomatic relations. I want the international community to announce SAC as a terrorist group and to block military-owned and military-backed companies. To tackle SAC quickly, the public and international community must boycott military-owned and military-backed companies. Another path is to announce international sanctions on Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) and freeze payments to the junta. This is the most effective way and will mitigate potential harms on people."

"At the moment, rather than advocating and supporting labor/worker rights, we must try to regain labor/ worker rights. The country is in a revolutionary stage, and NUG doesn't have full authority to implement economic policies in the present situation, which is similar to the one before 2010 when workers had no right. We can regain these rights through revolutionary methods, and in the meantime, to help union leaders who have been arrested, the international community must keep the pressure on SAC."

"After the revolution, everything will change. Under the previous administration, the NLD had limited space in adopting economic policies due to cronies and military groups being present in the political life. Under NUG, economic investment policies will benefit the public. Cronies and military groups benefited a lot from resource extraction, and under NUG, it's the public who will benefit from resource sharing to mitigate the class difference."

IN THE CITY OF YANGON, THE WORKING-CLASS RISKS EVERYTHING TO SURVIVE

The first industrial zones in Myanmar were established in Hlaing Thar Yar, Shwe Pyi Thar, and Dagon Myo Thit townships of Yangon in the 1990s, during which some 500,000 squatters were moved from the inner city's slums to those neighborhoods. Myanmar's burgeoning garment industry and most labor-intensive export-oriented industries remain concentrated in those areas to this day.

An anonymous trishaw driver who lives and works in one of these suburbs described his current living situation: *"I live with my mom, who works as a day laborer at a factory in Hlaing Thar Yar. We both need to work to pay our house rent and horrendous living expenses. Even with the Covid-19 health risks and the threatening situation since the coup, I still have to go out to make money for my family, but I make sure to put on a mask and properly wash my hands once I get home."*

Since the beginning of the coup, violence has directly affected the industrial suburbs of Hlaing Tharyar, Shwe Pyi Thar, and South Dagon, with scores of protesters killed and more than a dozen factories, mostly Chinese-owned, torched. The main commercial city came to a standstill at the height of the repression following mass protests in Yangon. Even as the night curfew was lifted in the country's largest city, no one roamed the streets after 8 pm for fear of arbitrary arrest by soldiers and policemen. The trishaw driver reflected: *"Sometimes, I feel unsafe going out because of the political tension. But my financial situation doesn't allow me to stay at home. So, I just have to take risks to make money for my family and spend less on everything. The days when I don't get enough passengers, I can only afford to buy vegetables for food. But my story is not bad compared to my elderly neighbor, who doesn't have any children. He has to go downtown to beg for money. In early April, the military government donated rice in my ward, but I didn't take it. Until now, I have received rice from the World Food Program just one time, and I haven't got any support from local volunteer groups since most of them donate secretly, as they can get arrested if the military government finds out about their activities."*

On November 16th, the Northern District Administration Department issued an official letter to all administrators from Insein Township stating that it will dissolve any charitable organization that fails to register with the department and that unregistered vehicles belonging to charities would be appropriated by the junta. In other words, even charity has been coopted and criminalized. In the context of the current economic hardship, people in Myanmar are facing tremendous pressures from every angle. This is particularly true for the urban poor working-class in Yangon. At the moment, they subsist without support as aid tends to concentrate around conflict areas or IDP camps under humanitarian programs. In Yangon, rent and costs remain high, and households have to toil to secure the most basic shelter.

FARMERS LEFT WITH NO CHOICES

In the plains of upper Myanmar, the increase of commodity prices paired with the decrease of crop prices and blockaded trade routes has left farmers with no choice but to enter into a spiral of debt and/or sell their land.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

Magway

An anonymous male farmer, 49, used to support his whole family with his small pepper plantation in Magway: *"Before the coup, the pepper market was good, we could export it to other countries, and the price was high, at 4,500 MMK per viss (a Myanmar unit of measurement equal to about 1.6 kilograms). After the coup, it can't be exported to other countries anymore. The closure of roads and difficulty in transportation led the price of pepper to decrease to 2,000 kyats per viss while the price of pesticides necessary to grow it increased. Before the coup, I went to work in Kachin state when pepper planting couldn't cover the expenses for my household. After the coup, I don't dare to go to Kachin state due to the terrible war underway. It's very difficult to feed my family, and I have to borrow money with high-interest rates from other people. My daughter had also planned to go work in Japan, but now her plan was destroyed because of the coup."*

A female farmer from the same region, 29, who plants rice and onions, describes the same issue of being stuck with products for which there is no market anymore: *"The price of onions decreased from 1,500-2,000 MMK per viss to 300-600 MMK, so I have to bear a great financial loss as crop prices decrease while commodity prices increase. The price of petroleum increased a lot, which makes it difficult to afford to drive to our rice fields that need to be watered daily, as Magway is a low rainfall area."*

Sagaing

An anonymous male farmer, 33, evokes the impact of the insecurity which has engulfed his region, Sagaing, one of the hotspots of anti-coup protests: *"Before the coup, the main source of income for our family was from planting rice, betel and onions. Our village was peaceful, and business was going well. Since the coup, it's very difficult because when the soldiers come to my village, I have to run into the jungle, so I can't take care of the crops I have planted and cannot sell betel because of the closure of the roads. This year, I didn't get agricultural loans from the government either, so I have to borrow money from others, and they charge high interest. The price of betel went from 7000 MMK to 500-2000 MMK since the coup, so I plan to sell one acre of our land to solve our financial crisis."*

Another farmer from the region, 45, describes the impact of inflating agricultural and petroleum products, as the price of a liter of gasoline or diesel fuel went from 700 MMK to over 1,500 MMK: *"After the coup, pesticides and fertilizers increased by 30 percent and the hiring fee for a reaping machine went from 40,000 to 55,000 MMK. This year, planting rice will be less profitable due to high agricultural expenses, and despite the price of basic commodities having risen, the price of rice stayed stable at around 6.5 lakhs to 7 lakhs MMK. Since agriculture is not a profitable source of income anymore, I had to borrow money with high interest to invest in livestock."*

In Lashio, Shan State, the restriction of movement literally blocked the local economy, according to a resident: *"After the coup, we can't do anything freely. Before the coup, I could go outside early in the morning safely, and people could sell and buy easily. But, now, we can't do this anymore, and it has a really big impact on our society. Some casual workers and businesses related to food and restaurants depend on the goods which come and go by the 2 am - 3 am train. Now, the train has stopped, and a lot of people are in severe trouble. This is only one of the problems caused by the coup."*

RESTRICTED BUSINESS HOURS RUINING LIVELIHOODS AND ASPIRATIONS

In Shwedaung township, a small town on the east bank of the Irrawaddy River near Pyay District, the curfew and restricted business hours of the market have ruined livelihoods and aspirations.

Since July 18, 2021, the Shwedaung market has only been allowed to reopen from 6 am to 9 am instead of 6 am to 6 pm. Shopkeepers can't sell enough during this limited time. A night curfew was announced on the same day from 11 pm to 4 am. This affects all of the workers from small factories, trishaw drivers and other informal workers, as well as small shops in the town. In early October, the curfew was extended from 6 pm to 6 am, which made it impossible for stall vendors to buy goods before the opening of the market. So, most of them have been forced to sell all their wares and stop their work at the market.

An unprecedented plunge of the kyat drove up the prices of key imported commodities. For example, the price of one bottle of cooking oil went from 3,800 to 5,500 MMK. One pack of Decolgen pills, a medication for clogged nose and headaches, increased from 400 to 1,000 MMK and one viss of potatoes nearly doubled, from 1,200 to 2,000 MMK. For ordinary people, these increases pose a serious livelihood threat. People resorted to selling their goods or skipping meals. One lady said she could not ride her motorcycle anymore due to the increased price of oil: *"I am using my bicycle now, and I have to consume and save carefully these days. I was selling goods at the market before the coup, and I made between 5,000 and 10,000 MMK per day. Now I barely make half of that. My household of five members needs 5,000-6,000 MMK per day to survive. If I don't make this in a day, I have to sell some of my things."*

Many people with property or homes are trying to sell them. But there are more people trying to sell than people who are willing to buy and invest at the moment. Thus, sellers have to drastically lower their prices, and the ones who secure sales get much less than they would have before the coup. Not only do they receive less cash, the value of that kyat also leaves them with a fraction of what they should receive.

The kyat reached a record high of about 2,700 to the USD in mid-September 2021 – that is double the rate before the coup. At the end of November, the dollar was down to 1,800 MMK, but with the country engulfed in a full-scale conflict, the kyat is far from stable. The sharp rise of the kyat against the dollar and the sharp fall in land and housing prices have left even those who are relatively well off with few desirable options. As for vendors who bought goods when the value of the kyat against the dollar was very high, they now have to incur losses that few of them can afford.

With the fall of the kyat, the local gold price rose to more than 100,000 MMK per gram since September, from 80,000 MMK back in January. One gold shop owner in Shwedaung township confirmed that the number of people who want to sell their gold accessories has multiplied by three since the coup. People are selling heirlooms and anything of value to feed themselves and their families.



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

THE CRY OF LABOR AFTER THE COUP

"We published a rapid impact assessment on Employment in Myanmar[5] since the military takeover in July 2021 but we are not in a position to update this report at the moment. Key findings from the report show that in the first half of 2021, an estimated 14 percent of working hours were lost, which is equivalent to the working time of at least 2.2 million full-time workers. Compared to the fourth quarter of 2020, employment numbers fell by an estimated 6 percent in the second quarter 2021, reflecting job losses of 1.2 million. Women have been more impacted by job losses than men. In the first half of 2021, employment in construction, garments, and tourism and hospitality decreased by an estimated 35 percent, 31 percent and 25 percent, respectively, with even higher relative losses in working hours. We are still preparing to launch a survey on child labour since the coup, with two particular angles: the culture of entitlement and poverty, which will tell us, in detail, how families are struggling on the ground."

-Interview, Piyamal Pichaiwongse, ILO deputy representative for Myanmar

After the coup, many worker organizations issued a statement, including the Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM), which demanded the immediate release of State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners. Unionists took a leading role in the movement as they had experience with strikes, protests and navigating threats.

On February 5th, workers started campaigning against the coup inside factories by wearing their uniforms with the logo of their union and singing revolutionary songs, such as "အရေးကြီးပြီ" (A Yay Kyi Pee), a long-used union chant calling for solidarity in critical times. The song became a very popular hit as mass protests began in the main cities. In some factories, tensions rose, and managers called the police and military to handle the insubordination. SAC authorities came and requested names of union leaders, their personal information and their address. In the middle of the night on February 5th, police came to the FGWM office and checked the building. Luckily, no one was in the office, as workers were conducting their meeting about their next plan in a different place. As they thought that police would arrest union leaders in the coming days, all of the FGWM staged a protest the next day.

Around 5,000 workers pressured drivers of buses and trucks to take them from the industrial zones to the first checkpoint on the way to downtown Yangon and came to Hledan, a middle-class area. February 6th was the first day of protests on Yangon streets, and the movement then spread all over the country. Demonstrators demanded the abolishment of

[5] Since the interview the ILO has conducted a second rapid assessment.

the 2008 Constitution and the military dictatorship, the immediate release of political prisoners and a full federal democracy. On the night of the first mass protest, police raided the house of union leaders, especially from FGWM. The military council also began to spread the rumor that Aung San Suu Kyi had been released to confuse people.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

On March 2nd, state-owned media invoked the 2011 Labor Organisation Law to declare 16 worker organizations illegal, but trade unions continued to strike and protest. On March 7th, 18 worker organizations called for a Nationwide General Strike for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar. As factory unions called upon workers not to work, some companies had to close while others agreed to bargain with the unions.

Tens of thousands of working-class residents in the industrial neighborhoods of Hlaing Thar Yar and Shwe Pyi Thar protested and were violently repressed. On the night of March 14th, the massacre of Hlaing Tharyar occurred – security forces killed more than 50 people in one of the most brutal crackdowns since the coup. Videos of police and soldiers celebrating and bragging about killing factory and CDM workers emerged on social media. Then, as anti-China sentiment increased due to the CCP's perceived support of the coup, 32 Chinese-owned factories were vandalized and burnt down. Ba Maung, a union leader at Gasan Apparel (Myanmode) factory, challenged reports that this was carried out by workers: *"It is impossible that workers did it. Factory compounds were guarded by the military, and many factories are affiliated with the army. Soldiers even camp inside. I think the military set it up and paid others to do it."* While the identity of the perpetrators remains unknown, the SAC regime used the fires to justify the imposition of martial law in Hlaing Thar Yar, Shwe Pyi

Thar, and other sub-urban townships. More than 100,000 workers, who are mostly internal migrants from the Ayerwaddy plains, fled Yangon and returned to their native township and villages.

At the end of April, after Thingyan, the New Year Festival in Myanmar, most workers had to return to Yangon to support themselves and their relatives at home. According to Myanmar Now, 200,000 workers lost their jobs since the military seized power on 1 February 2021. But some estimates put the number of job losses both in the public and private sector in the millions. Many union members were unable to go back to their factories as they were now a target. Ba Maung experienced this himself: *“Union leaders from every factory have been arrested, and most of them had to run away and are still in hiding now, like myself. The presidents of our unions have been arrested in September for having been involved in demonstrations after the coup and sentenced to three years in jail on October 29th. They don’t want unions in the factories. When we asked why, they just said they don’t want to work with unionized workers anymore. Almost all of them became unemployed.”*

Even at the height of the protests, most CDM workers could only afford to go on strike on their days off, and six months of strikes and unemployment have left most workers/civil servants with nowhere to turn. *“In our factory, there were 612 workers, but now only 330 are left due to the others having been dismissed without proper reasons. The rest of the workers still try to fight for their rights and benefits, but they are under constant threat, as employers told them that if they engage in any political action, they would inform the authorities. The workers usually get a daily wage of 5,200 MMK and a skill and attendance bonus. However, the factory announced a pay cut. Workers were informed they would only be paid minimum wage. So, all the remaining workers went on strike in early November. On November 8th, the factory general manager called for troops to the factory, five military trucks and a police car came to threaten the workers. They took pictures of everyone, and workers are now afraid of being arrested,”* said Ba Maung.

On October 6th, four garment workers: two women and two men, were sentenced to life in prison on four charges, including high treason and links to an unlawful association. Back in March, at least six workers were killed after the factory owners called in the military to suppress workers demanding pay for late salaries. On October 12th, Daw Khaing Zar Aung, chairwoman of Myanmar Industry Craft and Services Trade Union Federation (MICS-TUF), told a meeting of the OECD that 27 worker rights activists had been killed and 116 arrested since the coup – some of whom were convicted under Section 505a.

Piyamal Pichaiwongse, ILO deputy representative for Myanmar, summarizes the threatening contexts:

“The unions’ executive committees are in big trouble. A climate free from violence, pressure or threat is essential to the exercise of freedom of association. As the ILO Director General in his statement made on the situation that trade unions quickly faced right after the military takeover and I quote “I therefore call for the withdrawal of the order restricting assemblies

of more than five persons, a halt to the repression of dissenting voices and the full respect of workers' fundamental and human rights and freedoms. I urge the military authorities to ensure that no workers, including civil servants, are detained, intimidated or harassed for participating in peaceful protests." Trade unions encountered narrower space to exercise their rights. The labour movement of trade union has become impossible on the ground. Trade unions and labour activists are hiding in different location as security situation is increasingly worsening. They struggle to support their members from hiding places. At the factory level, a few private companies still hold talks with union leaders because they know that without dialogue with workers they have a better chance to gain support from workers in daily operations, in case the operations could more or less continue and do not suffer too greatly ongoing security situation. Some foreign-owned companies still allow the employees to go on labour strikes, though without being paid of course. Some companies mitigate their risks by simply go along with instructions of the de facto authorities, but on the other hand they continue to dialogue with workers on the situation facing them."

Unions are no longer allowed within the vast majority of factories. In some cases, employers call the authorities to force workers to sign abusive contracts. Workers have been stripped of all their rights and protections. If workers raise questions or push back, they get fired, *"After the coup, workers have been dismissed and given only half of the compensation they were entitled to. Employers also refuse to recognize basic worker benefits now,"* Ba Maung explained.

Forced overtime, sometimes extending to Sundays and during official holidays, and wage cuts at the end of the month have become common. Minimum wage rates, which were officially set at 4,800 MMK per day, have been reduced from 3,600 to 2,400 MMK and are regularly dismissed. Next to no personal protection equipment has been provided as waves of Covid-19 have threatened workers and their communities. A worker stated that in September 2021 that he received only two masks per week, and that rights to medical leave and social security had been canceled. *"It's not the Ministry of Labour anymore, but the Ministry of Employers,"* he proclaimed.

In the absence of any monitoring body, occurrences of political prisoners allegedly being forced to do hard labor are emerging: *"Bago Jail has detained around 400-500 political prisoners since February, of which around 150 were arrested under section 505(a). One recently freed prisoner told DVB that those held under Section 505(a) were forced to do hard labor despite not being sentenced to it, whilst criminals sentenced for more serious crimes were exempted from the tasks,"* reports the DVB.

HOUSING RIGHTS

In addition to losing their benefits or jobs, worker communities also had to worry about securing some type of accommodation. In mid-March, 1,000 railway workers participating in the CDM were evicted from the Ma Hlwa Gone railway staff housing quarters. On October 13th, the Yangon city committee announced that more than 1,000 houses will be destroyed along the Yangon-Pathein Highway in Hlaingtharyar Township. The informal settlements were home to hundreds of thousands of people who fled the Ayeyarwady delta region following Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and came to look for work in the commercial capital. Based on the UN-Habitat assessment, there are 423 informal settlements in Yangon, which account for approximately 10 percent of the city's total population.

Under the NLD government, more than 250,000 squatter households were issued resident certificates for Yangon Division, and the plans to enable them to eventually get access to low-income housing were underway. However, on October 28th, the SAC carried out a mass expulsion, and areas that were home to thousands of worker families now look like a desolate pile of rubbles. Myanmar Evictions Watch, a collective that came together to create a public archive of forced evictions and displacement following the coup, paints a picture of the desperate situation^[6]: *"Evicted protestors are dependent on existing social networks, local civil society organizations, and parahita (voluntary) groups. Several evicted residents are sheltered temporarily in monasteries, churches, or large community halls belonging to one of these organizations. In addition, support to evicted communities has been often restricted and cracked down by the Tatmadaw. For example, factory owners and hostel owners were ordered not to provide any rooms to evicted informal residents. Troops and police vehicles have been stationed around the sites of eviction so that no one can return or conduct any protests. Reports also indicate that those who planned to return to their native villages were 'charged' about 40,000 kyats by military soldiers near the Pan Hlaing bridge."*

In early November, the junta turned its attention to evicting settlers living along Yangon's Bayintnaung-Pale and Shwepyithar Bridge roads. *"The creation of Rangoon was contingent on the erasure of all pre-colonial rights or claims on land. Rangoon then developed through successive waves of forced displacement of the urban poor, whether after the 1958 military caretaker government or the post-1988 forced evictions. For the military junta, a central objective of this transformation of the city through evictions was to make the city more immune to insurrections and protests. We have recorded, since March 2021, close to 40 incidents where civil servants participating in CDM have been evicted from their housing, and these cases are spread across 11 different states/regions (Yangon, Mandalay, Chin, Bago, Shan, Mon, Magway, Sagaing, and Bago). We want to clarify here that the use of*

[6]<https://asiaarttours.com/myanmar-eviction-watch-eviction-as-warfare-in-myanmar/>

forced evictions as a preferred mode of planning is not restricted to military-run administrations. As recently as 2016, the former NLD Chief Minister of Yangon, Phyo Min Thein, announced a plan to relocate ‘squatters’ in Yangon. The image of the ‘squatter,’ a colonial creation, looms large in urban discourses in Myanmar- it is repeatedly invoked to create a state of ‘displaceability’ and denial of substantive citizenship rights. Even before the coup, fear of evictions was pervasive among communities,” reminds the Myanmar Evictions Watch Team.



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

BACK ON THE ROAD TO EXODUS

In Lashio, Shan state, a local resident explained that people had little choice but to look abroad for safer opportunities, and those too were uncertain: *"In the past, we sent our children to a monastery in Mandalay and other places in 'proper Burma' to make sure they were safe from conflicts between EAOs and the army in our villages. But now, the problem is really big in the lower part of Myanmar too, so we don't have much choice to keep them safe. Right now, under political uncertainty, wherever we go, it is unsafe. We don't dare go down to Mandalay anymore to look for jobs and send our children. Possibly, people will run to China or Thailand to become migrant workers. No employer can guarantee you decent and safe working conditions right now. Due to the political situation, there is no good place to work or stay anymore."*

Many Myanmar workers have had no choice but to illegally cross the border to Thailand. Key crossing points include the Myawaddy-Mae Sot border and Three Pagodas Pass, between Sangkhlaburi in Thailand and Payathonzu in Myanmar. Three Pagodas Pass, which sits on Thai soil, is renowned for its dozens of textile factories that rely exclusively on the Myanmar labor force as thousands of workers used to cross the border every day for decades. In March 2020, Thailand closed the border due to Covid-19, and most Myanmar workers went back.

Since the coup, scores of people are trying to return by any means possible. Hundreds if not thousands are being caught and sent back every week by the Thai Border Patrol, after having paid between 15,000 and 25,000 THB to an agent. But this does not slow the exodus, as a local money changer and shop owner explains: *"The border is still closed, so there is no legal crossing happening at the moment. However, illegal crossings of people trying to go to work in other parts of Thailand happen every day. A few stay in Three Pagodas Pass. About 70 or 80 workers rent a place and stay on the Thai side to work in the textile factories. If you look from the outside, it looks like the factory is closed, but it is secretly running with less than a hundred workers."*



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

ONE VILLAGE, ONE GOAL: WORKING IN THAILAND'S RUBBER PLANTATIONS

October 2021 // Thailand's rubber plantations as a lifeline

Voices from a village in Thanbyuzayat township, Mon state

1) Nai Min- 55 years old

"I live with my 11-year-old granddaughter. I have two children, a daughter, who is married, and a son, who is still single. Both of them are working in Thailand. My son works in a shop, and my daughter and her husband work on a rubber plantation. My wife and I have worked in Thailand since our marriage three decades ago, but she passed away last year. At first, we worked at construction sites. But later on, we went down to Southern Thailand to work in the rubber plantations. We came home every 5 or 10 years or whenever our family needed us.

Now, I do work, but I do not have a regular income. My household expenses are covered by my daughter who sends us a small amount of money every month. I really want to go back to Thailand to get a stable job and income. Life is much easier, and we can save money there. Here, we work very hard, but we earn very little. I do not want to depend so much on my daughter. I want to work and live off my own income. I could only become self-reliant in Thailand."

2) Aye Mee - 41 years old

"My husband and I were working in rubber plantations in Thailand for thirteen years and came back three years ago. Last year, we used all the savings we made to build our house and now work on our own rubber farm here. We have a 10-year-old son.



Photo Credit: Researchers' Republic

In Thailand, we live in small huts, and our expenses are minimal, while in Myanmar, we have to spend a huge part of our income to cover household expenses as well as social expenses such as traditional donations, weddings, religious ceremonies, etc. that can't be avoided as a house owner.

In Thailand, plantations are bigger, with up to 2,000 trees, and we can get more rubber. With the greater value of the Thai baht against the Myanmar kyat, we could save a lot more there. On average, we were able to put aside 30 lakhs per year after expenses. We were also able to send money to my parents. Here, I work every day, but I can barely cover my household expenses, and there is no work during the rainy season because the monsoon is much heavier here than in rubber plantations regions in Thailand, so we have no income at all.

At first, I was thinking to start a business here – apart from working on the rubber plantation – but with the Covid-19 restrictions since June 2020, it was impossible to start a business, and the military coup made the whole situation worse. Our village is small, so one has to be very careful about investing in a new activity. I am really stressed thinking about how to survive here. It is hard to survive here, and now it is not easy to go to Thailand. But I want to go back when the border reopens."

3) Sajin - 30 years old

"I have a 12-year-old daughter with my first husband. Last year, we separated, and I got remarried. My new husband and I were planning to go back to work in Thailand, but we could not due to Covid-19. As we don't have a house, we all live in my parent's home, or sometimes, we go to live at my husband's parents' house. My older sister looks after my daughter as I can't contribute much to her needs as my husband and I do not have a stable job.

I really, really want to go back to Thailand because I know that I can make money. You feel very relieved when you are in Thailand because you know that you have enough money for yourself, for your parents, and for your children. Even without Covid-19, it is hard to survive here when you do not have a regular income, and there is no way to save money. Last rainy season, my husband and I had to do odd jobs, anything for anyone who needs daily laborers. We worked on a new rubber plantation farm, dug holes to plant new trees and cleaned someone's farm. As it was short-term work, you earn little and spend it all in a few days. I do not have money to invest, and I do not have previous experience or money to start a business and cannot take the risk of losing more money.

I heard that it costs 24,000 THB to cross the border illegally at the moment to Thailand. If the border reopens legally and we can get work permits, all the young people in our village go to Thailand. I know many people who can do nothing but wait. I will have many friends to go back with."

CROSSING THE BORDER FOR HARBOR AND A VACCINATION

Mae Sot is a town in northwest Thailand that has hosted a substantial population of residents from Myanmar for decades. These migrants and expatriates include traders and workers looking for opportunities and higher-paid jobs, as well as refugees and activists who fled conflict and repression in Myanmar. Ko Sai, a labor rights leader in a factory which employs an overwhelmingly Myanmar workforce, described the local post-coup dynamics: *"Since the coup, many Myanmar people have come again to Mae Sot. Most of the high-profile activists have a plan to be resettled in a third-country. Most others think it is sufficient for them to have a chance to live and work here. More than anything, they would like to have a legal status and a work permit. There are many groups of volunteers in Mae Sot who help migrant workers, such as the Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF) and the Map Foundation and Labour Law Clinic (LLC). Our organization helps them by educating them on their legal rights and what to do after they have been dismissed. When there are problems, these groups collect the necessary information of migrant workers and inform the labor department about it. In some cases, we manage to solve the issue at a personal level, but in other cases, we have to hire lawyers and do more work."* Migrating to work in Thailand with or without documentation entails significant challenges and risks. But the employment opportunities and civil society support available in hubs like Mae Sot can be life-changing for migrant workers and their home communities in Myanmar.

For the thousands of people from Myanmar who have crossed the Moei River at dawn, reaching Thailand has also been a way to get safely vaccinated against Covid-19. As the third wave of Covid-19 raged in July, *"Myanmar black market retailers started importing and reselling the Indian-manufactured Covishield vaccine online at a mark-up of up to 25 times the original price. One vial of the vaccine, each of which contains 10 doses of the vaccine and is produced by the Serum Institute of India, is typically priced at 80,000 kyats (US\$49). In Myanmar, people were paying anywhere from 1.3m to 2m kyats (\$790 to \$1,215) per vial, and some sellers were even charging the buyers 100,000 to 500,000 kyats (\$61 to \$304) to administer the jabs to them,"* according to independent media, Myanmar Now.

Myanmar has received 41 million doses of vaccine, including 9.9 million doses as a donation, of Sinovac and Sinopharm from China according to Chinese reports. The SAC's Ministry of Health stated on February 2, 2022, that a total of 41.19 doses have been administered, with 18.97 million people having been fully vaccinated with two doses. A private informal vaccine market has emerged. Myanmar Now quoted a Mandalay-based retailer stating, *"many people had refused to take the Chinese Sinovac vaccine which has been provided in limited quantities by the military council. Those who can afford it have instead been paying for Covishield,"* which the NLD government had been planning to procure for the public before they were ousted in the February 1 military coup. *"People are willing to pay as much as 400,000 kyats (\$243) per shot. The market demand is unbelievably high."*

Inflated prices provide no guarantee to retailers or buyers that the cold chain had been respected. If vaccines are not constantly stored at 6-8 degrees Celsius maximum during the whole import process, they may not only be ineffective, but they could potentially cause adverse reactions.

Conversely, in October 2021, Ko Sai explained that the process was quick, free and safe in Thailand for Myanmar people: *"Here, people can get the vaccine in every ward. In our ward, they already gave us vaccines, not only for documented people but also for undocumented people. One only needs to reach out to civil society groups based in their wards, who are volunteers, who collect information on migrant workers and help the ones in need. They will then inform the ward management who wants to be vaccinated. In factories, workers can get vaccines from their employers. And if people get sick, they can go to the ICRC or to Mae Tao Clinic."*

Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) is a health center on the Thai-Myanmar border, founded by Dr Cynthia Maung, that has served migrant communities for over 30 years. Since the start of the current wave of the pandemic, it has operated as an official field hospital for the Mae Sot public health system, providing care for infected individuals deemed low risk. Since June 28th, MTC has treated a total of 724 COVID-19 patients, all of whom have either been referred from the Thai health system, are staff from MTC and partner organizations or are residents of the surrounding communities.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

BOYCOTTING THE MILITARY ECOSYSTEM

As a way of resisting, many began boycotting Myanmar's vast network of military-owned and crony businesses. People quit buying state-run lottery tickets, refused to pay any form of tax, be it electricity bills, water bills, and income tax, and altered what they ate, drank, and consumed on a daily basis. According to the NUG, in mid-September, the widespread public boycott of electricity bills deprived the junta of \$1 billion in revenue from its military-operated power company.

Before the coup, Mytel, a telecommunication operator owned jointly by Viettel, a conglomerate under the control of Vietnam's Ministry of National Defence, Myanmar National Telecom Holding Public Limited (MNTH) Star High Public Company Limited, a subsidiary of Myanmar Economic Corporations (MEC), which is a Tatmadaw military conglomerate now sanctioned by the USA, UK, and EU, benefited from a 10,000,000 strong customer base. In March 2021, the company became one of the first targets of the collective anti-military rage. The organization Justice for Myanmar (JFM) disclosed that *"confidential Mytel profit projections show that the Myanmar military may be entitled to receive over US\$700 million in dividends over ten years for their share in the military-controlled mobile network operator. These astronomical profits come from the people of Myanmar, who are suffering immensely under the military's tyranny. Every phone call on the Mytel network and every kilobyte of data finances the people's oppression."*[7]

A phone shop owner in downtown Yangon interviewed in mid-August said, *"During the revolution, the number of people buying Ooredoo and Telenor SIM prepaid bill cards increased substantially, and the number of people buying new Mytel top-up cards and SIM cards has decreased significantly."* People broke and threw away their Mytel SIM cards. Users of all Mytel-related apps downgraded them and wrote bad reviews on the Playstore/App Store, and some of the Mytel-related businesses were shut down after being reported as scams on Facebook.

Just after Mytel relaunched its business page on Facebook in early September, following seven months of withdrawal, a wave of attacks on dozens of its telecom towers by PDFs raged across the country. The majority were blown up in the Sagaing-Magway borderlands. *"Our attacks interrupt connectivity for Mytel users, and that is one of our objectives, to damage the service and cut the military's revenue streams,"* explains a PDF member to DVB, which found out that *"each Mytel tower has a value of between USD 200,000 and USD 300,000: a significant burden to bear for Mytel, who now face the dilemma of establishing*

[7] <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/press-releases/jfm-finds-myanmar-generals-could-be-entitled-to-over-us-700-million-in-profits-from-mytel-over-ten-years>

security measures to protect some 4,488 transmission towers and 14,129 base transceiver stations.”[8]



And then there is the alcohol, a favored state-monopoly. On November 23rd, the Myanmar Brewery Limited company—which includes Kirin Ichiban, Myanmar Beer, Andaman Gold, and Black Shield—applied to terminate its activity. The joint venture between sanctioned military conglomerate MEHL (49 percent shareholder) and Japan’s Kirin Holdings (51 percent shareholder) managed to make the green cans and bottles of Myanmar Beer the most recognizable brand in the country. Together, the companies, which also jointly own Mandalay Brewery, once produced about 80 percent of the beer sold in Myanmar.

After the coup, Myanmar Beer has been declared contraband by EAOs, local PDF groups and the NUG. The ten-month boycott resulted in a 49.4 percent decline in the third quarter year-on-year earnings and a loss of US\$193 million over two quarters. Kirin said that sales of volumes of beer had fallen 20 percent in the Myanmar market due to the spread of Covid-19 and “political upheaval,” while sales of volumes for Myanmar Brewery had fallen by 30 percent. *“In most shops, Myanmar Beer cans have been emptied out on the street. People drink mostly Chang and Tiger Beer now,”* declared a local journalist.

The Japanese beer giant, Kirin, has struggled to end its joint venture and is now in the midst

[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUIvMhfUX_o

of a convoluted legal struggle involving arbitration in Singapore. Kirin has made it clear that they want out of the venture and criticized the military for being 'uncooperative' in negotiations. However, a December statement from Kirin stated, "The goal of contributing to Myanmar's economy and society through the beer business remains unchanged." Rights group Justice For Myanmar has urged the company to prevent the military from monopolizing the venture. *"Kirin must now take all measures available, including international arbitration, to prevent MEHL from taking control of Myanmar Brewery and to ensure that no payments are made to the Myanmar military, which is a terrorist organization,"* said Yadanar Maung, a spokesperson for the group. *"Kirin should also ensure that NUG consents to any decisions made about the future of Myanmar Brewery."*



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

Dagon Beers, Mectel operator, Myawaddy and Innwa Banks, Cement bags and Red Ruby and Premium Gold cigarettes, Milky, Moon and Seven milk and creamer brands, Rhinoceros and Sinmin Cement Bags, Shwenantaw and Forever jewellery stores, Dentomec toothpaste, Starmart Nine Mile Showroom and various other supermarket chains, Royal Sportainment Complex, Sugarmec refined sugar, Thant Sin alcohol hand gel, MEC, Sunflower and Akadi rice brands and Vega Plastic Products are among the long list military-affiliated companies which have been singled out. People can now download the application မာသုံးနဲ့ (Ma Thone Nae = Don't Use), which references all military-affiliated companies to boycott.

A recent target of the anti-coup ire was Myanmar Plaza, a high-end shopping mall in Yangon. On November 25th, two young pro-democracy protesters were violently put down by security guards, with one girl being punched in the face. The next day, Myanmar public and student unions called for a boycott of the mall run by HAGL (Hoang Anh Gia Lai), a

prominent Vietnamese company accused of massive land grabs in Laos and Cambodia. International franchises Bonchon and Gloria Jean's Coffee and LG announced that they intend to stop the activities of their branches in the mall. Most shops closed the next day. On social media, Yangon PDFs warned that they could not guarantee the safety of shoppers visiting Myanmar Plaza anymore, and on Google Maps, Myanmar Plaza was renamed PDF YGN HQ (PDF Yangon Headquarters).

From November 27th to December 4th, the Federation of General Workers Myanmar called for a boycott of all public transport lines affiliated with military companies, such as Parami Bus Line and Omni focus, that are part of the Yangon Bus System. The move surrounded the National Day of Myanmar, December 1st, which celebrates the beginning of student-led protests against the British colonial government in 1920. In the same way that the diverse movements led by Mahatma Gandhi from the Non-Cooperation movement to the Dandi Salt March and the Quit India Campaign attempted to cripple the British empire, the combination of guerilla armed resistance, local and global boycotts, and general socioeconomic disruption aim to deplete the junta's coffers and put its interests under constant threat.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

The local boycott of the military ecosystem has been echoed by a global push for sanctions and exits. On September 3rd, the FGWM called on companies to stop all their operations in Myanmar. On October 15th, the Labour Alliance, a network of workers' organizations that came together to collectively bargain for their rights during the first wave of Covid-19, called for Comprehensive Economic Sanctions. *"The idea is to win the revolution in the short term by bringing the junta to its knees economically and to avoid the long-term fight of another dictatorship era. In their statements, they put it in the terms: "For a Future with Dignity," explains a local researcher. The unions say that they understand the consequences of this call, in terms of massive unemployment. But that is what workers have chosen, they argue. "I cannot do anything even though I know my rights have been violated. The present problem needs to end quickly. If this is what we have to do to solve it, that is what we have to do," said one former unionist from a plastic factory.*

Ba Maung, the above-referenced union leader from Gasan Apparel Factory, who has been dismissed since March, explains the current strategy: *"Workers are still fighting to get their rights and are still actively participating in the movement against the dictatorship. Some workers from some factories conducted fundraising and donated to the revolution themselves. They believe that only real democracy can solve their problems - oppression of workers and labor rights violations. A democratic system is the only way to enhance their human rights. The general public, including factory workers, simply don't want to live under military dictatorship, and we will do everything we can to topple it.*

It's less than a year since the coup, and we are already under such cruel oppression. It is a guarantee that the situation will get worse. It is already much worse than before the coup. We and the next generation will suffer under this bad system. So, all of us, we are fighting for the abolishment of the military dictatorship now... We request employers who worked with military and military-affiliated employers to stand with the people and stop paying the tax to the regime. We are currently working on stopping the money inflow to the military. I will continue my work against the military regime until the restoration of democracy in our country, and even if my generation still has to live through an era of dictatorship, I would like to demand employers to stop their oppression and exploitation of workers by affiliating with the military."

It is important to note that our research also found many workers, including unionists who did not favor foreign sanctions. These informants had concerns that this strategy actually played into the hand of the junta, as it could inadvertently compound the military's control and leave workers in an even more compromised position. That is why local informants and analysts, many of whom very much support the NUG and all of whom are fully in support of the democracy movement, quietly question whether the exit of foreign brands is something to celebrate. As one stated, *"the Tatmadaw has a long history of deflecting the suffering from sanctions onto the people."* In the same way that the pandemic hit the most marginalized populations the hardest, the burdens of sanctions often land squarely on the shoulders of the most vulnerable.

While the boycott debate may be never-ending, unions and other worker groups did come together and adopt a common stance, even if there was no universal consensus. That collective capacity will be a critical asset for the working class as they push ahead.

Pertinently, Piyamal Pichaiwongse, ILO deputy representative for Myanmar, says: *"We see the Civil Disobedience Movement as a product of the ILO confidence building work we've done for 15 years. Myanmar people now rise above and move forward, establishing their own premises. For years, we have promoted their desire to become the masters of their own strategy."*

Even if the junta can try to constrain labor rights groups, they cannot erase the awareness and avenues that have been built. In Yangon, a woman who lost her job at a garment factory found an opportunity to document the abuses faced by herself and her colleagues: *"I used to work at a factory, but now I am writing articles related to factory workers' issues for a labor rights organization, whose name I can't disclose. It's tight for me these days since all the prices for basic commodities have risen, so I have to spend carefully. Fortunately, the owner of the flat I live in agreed to reduce the rent since the COVID-19 outbreak. Last month, I also needed money when COVID-19 hit my family member. I have received rice from the ward authority once, but I don't know which organization donated it to us. My organization supports me financially, and they can also arrange for me to move to a safe place."*

Ko Maung and Stephen Campbell aptly summarize the collective will that workers in industrial zones have exhibited since the coup: *"the employment-related demands made by workers in industrial zones around Yangon since February 1 last year - for better wages and working conditions and increased opportunities to organise - reveal a continuity between working-class struggles since the coup and those during the so-called democratic transition. The enduring collective struggles of workers in industrial zones around Yangon - and those of ordinary people throughout the country - reflect the need for something beyond mere restoration of the pre-coup political arrangement. What is apparent in these workplace movements is a process of democratisation from below, as workers endeavour to assert collective power in their workplace."*[9]

During the 2020 elections, as an attempt to address their issues on their own terms with their representatives, eleven candidates campaigned on behalf of farmers and laborers in the Yangon industrial townships of Hlaing Thar Yar and Htantabin. Daw Su Su Nway competed for the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) seat of Kawhmu, which was the constituency ASSK won in the 2012 by-election and in the 2015 general election. *"As a labor rights activist, she was sentenced to 18 months in prison for exposing forced labor in her village in 2005. She was arrested again for participating in the so-called Saffron Revolution in 2008*

[9]<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/dare-to-struggle-dare-to-win-workers-resistance-since-the-coup/>

and sentenced to 12 and a half years in prison with hard labor. She was released in 2011 and formed the Myanmar Farmers Union, which has 30,000 members in more than 20 townships in eight regions and states,” according to the Myanmar Times.

The 11 independent candidates were backed by an alliance of 11 labour unions and civil society groups representing industrial workers and farmers. With the other candidates, Daw Su Su Nway pledged to support the reform objectives of the grassroots organizations they belonged to, such as the Myanmar Farmer Union and the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar. These objectives range from helping the farmers deal with land grabs, falling crop prices and insufficient government subsidies to overhauling the system for resolving workplace disputes in a way that protects workers and punishes abusive employers. In The Irrawaddy, U Maung Maung, the president of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM), suggests that workers should be preparing to take matters into their own hands: *“We have to create our own voices to bring changes in the legislation. We must raise the issues to those who can represent us. We must vote for candidates who will represent us, and we cannot just sit and not participate in the election.”*

While an overwhelming majority of workers chose to vote for the NLD as a 'safe' anti-military vote, these labor candidates jostled the political discourse. They voiced the disillusionment of millions of urban and rural poor citizens with previous administrations' poor record on labor and land reforms, the weak enforcement of laws that protect the basic rights of workers and farmers, and a general lack of political will to tackle social class inequalities in Myanmar.

*“It's important time brothers and sisters
Let's unite as one for now
We wrote our history with our blood
We have faith and truth
Purpose for freedom and peace
We must fight for our final battle”*

Song “အရေးကြီးပြီ” (A Yay Kyi Pee), a popular union chant which became a hit during the anti-coup protests

ABSENT NORMS ON RESPONSIBLE EXITS

“Farewell, Myanmar: Corporate exodus grows, from Europe to India,” a Nikkei Asia October 2021 article details a situation where foreign companies and investors from all over the world suspended operations and orders and divested after the coup. Some chose to exit. Others had no choice but to exit as they were subject to sanctions.

After pulling out of Myanmar in March, global retailers, Primark and H&M, began to resume orders in May, a move that was heavily scrutinized. Halting orders once again in June when the third wave of Covid-19 hit Myanmar. Norwegian telecom giant, Telenor, tried to exit, but their attempted sale to the controversial M1 Group was disrupted by the junta, as discussed below.

The partial exodus of foreign companies and investors has been messy. This is especially true on the ground, where the exits left vulnerable people in impossible situations. “Garment workers face a fresh threat: a boycott,” featured in *Frontier Myanmar*, was one of many pieces that spoke to the plight of workers resulting from order cancellations and closures. They convey scenarios where already vulnerable workers find themselves on the streets, regularly with partial or no wages for recent work done and with no support. The abovementioned research found that up to one-third of unemployed factory workers have turned to sex work to survive.

As a local analyst stated: “It seems backwards. The brands that employ millions of people and provide the best support are gone. But TotalEnergies and Chevron are here to stay, and all they do is stuff the pockets of the junta.” In the end, TotalEnergies and Chevron did choose to withdraw in mid-January 2022. Still, the sentiment remains valid and deserves consideration.

Beyond TotalEnergies and Chevron, fingers have been pointed particularly at surveillance technology providers and weapons manufacturers. Australia’s Future Fund recently made headlines for holding 4.9 million AUD “in 5 subsidiaries of Chinese majority state-owned arms manufacturer AVIC,” which is known to arm the junta.

This is not an argument for or against boycotts or sanctions. The point is that the corporate exodus from Myanmar has been haphazard at best, and the lives of ordinary people have been impacted deeply. The scene has highlighted a pressing normative gap.

The world lacks norms to guide responsible exits.

The authoritative normative framework, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, states:

“There are situations in which the enterprise lacks the leverage to prevent or mitigate adverse impacts and is unable to increase its leverage. Here, the enterprise should consider ending the relationship, taking into account credible assessments of potential adverse human rights impacts of doing so.”

The OECD Guidance for Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business similarly offers:

“In some limited cases, due diligence may help them decide whether or not to go ahead with or discontinue operations or business relationships as a last resort, because the risk of an adverse impact is too high or because mitigation efforts have not been successful.”

Neither the Interpretive Guide on the corporate responsibility to respect human rights nor the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas offers further clarification on when or how to terminate or exit.

There is a great deal of room for interpretation. The norms call for heightened human rights due diligence and the use of leverage, but those points are also immensely subjective. It is worth noting that a recent investigation found no indications of global brands carrying out any human rights due diligence on the ground after the coup in Myanmar.[10] Put another way, it appears that fateful decisions were being made in the absence of basic responsible business measures.

In the end, the world lacks sufficient norms to determine when, why, and how to end business operations and relationships responsibly, especially in high-risk environments like post-coup Myanmar. Exits can be devastating, especially when they are abrupt. In post-coup Myanmar, immense burdens and hardships were thrust upon the most vulnerable individuals— the very people whose well-being is to be paramount – because businesses simply withdrew without warning or precautions. Some of that suffering was and is avoidable. It could have been avoided through basic measures like ensuring that local workers received their full wages and benefits before getting laid off – something that is fateful for workers who live day-to-day: providing adequate warning so that workers and management can plan for changes; consulting with affected individuals and communities to identify risk mitigation opportunities; and special processing to promote the well-being of the most at-risk or vulnerable in the context of termination. There is likely much more that could and should be done. But even these simple steps can make a significant difference in the lives of affected people.

On the business side of things, Telenor’s predicament in post-coup Myanmar shows the

[10]<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/blog/where-is-the-human-rights-due-diligence-appraising-foreign-business-following-the-coup-in-myanmar/>

consequences of the normative gaps for all parties. Telenor faced immense global scrutiny for their attempt to sell their Myanmar branch to the controversial Lebanon-based M1 Group. That decision and the due diligence (or lack thereof) surrounding it has made Telenor the subject of a joint complaint through the OECD's Norwegian National Contact Point. The complaint was filed by 474 Myanmar-based civil society organizations who accused Telenor of failing to sufficiently engage local stakeholders. The junta asked Telenor executives not to leave the country until authorized to do so, prompting a hostage-like standoff that is ongoing as the sale is still not finalised and executives still banned from leaving the country as per this recent [Myanmar now story](#) on the subject. Telenor certainly mismanaged the situation, especially in terms of human rights due diligence. However, the lack of norms and guidance on responsible exits set the stage for disaster.



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

GOING FURTHER IN THE FACE OF PROTRACTING MILITARY RULE

The people of Myanmar have made it clear that they will do everything possible to resist military rule. Everyone who is on the side of the people of Myanmar wants the revolution to succeed. They (we) want to see a return to civilian rule. This is the only sustainable solution.

At the same time, military rule is protracting. China is moving forward with its long-term plans in Myanmar under contested junta control. Many countries, investors, and companies have carried on with business as usual in Myanmar. The longer the crisis extends the consequences, especially for the most vulnerable.

People have had to return to work and, in increasing numbers, send their kids to school and live life. Millions of people have gone to public clinics to receive vaccines from the Ministry of Health. People continue to refuse to pay taxes, but they may not be able to do so forever. None of this means they have abandoned the revolution or conceded to military rule. They are simply facing the new realities of protracting military rule. They have no choice. These are new realities that the world has to grapple with as well.

The people we spoke with want to see the world support and elevate the NUG as the legitimate government of Myanmar. They want the world to pressure and punish the junta in every way possible. But they made it clear that sanctions and shaming are not enough. They want and need the world to go further – to support people on the ground in concrete ways.

Every day tens of millions of workers and farmers and students wake up, go to their factory or field or desk, and persevere under military rule. They do what they must to survive and resist whenever and however they can. They are doing this with next to no help from the international community. At a moment when ordinary people are most vulnerable and need more support than ever, the world is backing away.

This time of protracting military rule is not a moment to back away from Myanmar. It is time for the world to get proactive and affect change on the ground. This is not only about keeping people alive and avoiding a famine. This is about powering a groundswell of resistance. While people in post-coup Myanmar are returning to life, by necessity, they are also capitalizing on every opportunity to transform the situation around them. There may be fewer protests in the streets, but the people of Myanmar are not backing down.

There are plentiful opportunities for the world to have a tangible, transformative impact on

the ground. At the grassroots, organizers and organizations are working (formally and informally) to enhance local resilience and put people in a better position to push back.

People are using cash from remittances, village rotating funds, and community sharing programs as leverage over local officials and to fund ‘unlawful’ activities. Micro-finance associations are keeping people out of a spiral of debt and putting them in a position to create opportunities for themselves and others. Youth are starting veiled political initiatives in their communities. They have awareness and connections, thus power. Local organizers in post-coup Myanmar are connecting with other youth in the region through initiatives like the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA), named after a popular drink in the region, launched in April 2020 as a pan-Asian virtual friendship between activists fighting for democracy and against the CCP’s influence over their respective governments – mainly Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Myanmar. From sharing digital protest art to translating strategic manuals to deal with tear gas and riot police, the MTA has become a powerful support system for a generation who will not accept isolation, repression and lack of political representation.



Photo Credit: Laure Siegel

The youth are galvanizing grassroots efforts to quietly document human rights violations. Unionists are organizing underground. A member of the local punk band “Rebel Riot” spoke about how their band continues to donate food in the slums and talks with communities about empowering the working class. Digital activists have platformed opportunities to

directly support local groups. People have stood up for micro-small and medium enterprises. These informal businesses are the backbone of the local post-coup economy, and their influence over the flow of information, goods, cash, and opportunities make them a deeply political force.



Photo Credit: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective

On the ground, there lies power and potential that the world has not begun to tap. As a military rule in Myanmar continues to protract, it is critical to recognize and capitalize on these efforts. It starts with believing in the ripple effect of rallying around migrant workers from Myanmar; directly investing in grassroots projects and programs; channeling cash and support to organizers and organizations on the ground; starting initiatives targeted at local SMEs; doing everything possible to protect and mobilize the workers and farmers who are more vulnerable than ever; promoting pro-poor NUG strategies, policies, and efforts; and finding ways to ensure that children in post-coup Myanmar gain the education and skills necessary to realize a better future for Myanmar.

MARCH 2022



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