

Calls for a general strike against military junta in Myanmar

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Amid mounting protests in Myanmar against the February 1 military coup, calls have been issued for a general strike against the junta. Demonstrations throughout the country over the weekend, estimated in the tens of thousands, continued on Monday despite the use of physical force by the police and threats of violence by the military.

On Monday, the *Myanmar Now* newspaper quoted opposition activist Ei Thinzar Maung urging government employees to stop work in an effort to “tear down the military dictatorship.”

Aye Misan, a nurse at a government hospital, told Reuters, “We health workers are leading this campaign to urge all government staff” to stop work. “Our message to the public is that we aim to completely abolish this military regime and we have to fight for our destiny.”

Those who stopped work yesterday appear to have done so on an individual basis and to have been mainly government employees and professionals. One doctor told the BBC: “Today, we, professionals—especially civil servant professionals such as doctors, engineers and teachers—came out to show that we are all together in this. Our objective is the same—to make the dictatorship fall.”

However, industrial workers joined the protest. “This is a work day, but we aren’t going to work even if our salary will be cut,” one protester, 28-year-old garment factory worker, Hnin Thazin, told the AFP.

Significantly a protest of about 1,000 people took place yesterday in the country’s capital of Naypyitaw, an artificial city created by the military as a bastion against social unrest and dominated by government offices. Police turned water cannon on demonstrators to try to disperse the gathering on a highway into the capital.

The Australian Associated Press reported: “Three lines of police in riot gear could be seen across a road as protesters chanted anti-coup slogans and told police they should serve the people not the military, according to media and a live feed of events. Police placed a sign in the road saying that live ammunition could be used if demonstrators breached the third line of officers.”

Naypyidaw is thought to be where top civilian leaders who were seized by the military during the coup, including Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, are being held.

In Myanmar’s largest city and former capital, Yangon, an internal note for UN staff estimated that some 60,000 people took to the streets to demand the release of political prisoners and an end to the military dictatorship. Nurses, teachers, civil servants and monks joined the rallies with placards such as “Say no to dictatorship” and “We want democracy.” Another sign read: “Release Our Leaders, Respect Our Votes, Reject Military Coup.”

The pretext for the military coup was allegations of electoral irregularities in national elections held last November. Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) won an overwhelming majority with 83 percent of the vote and took 396 out of 476 seats in the combined upper and lower houses of parliament. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development party won just 33 seats.

In the week leading up to the coup, the military challenged the results in the country’s electoral commission, which dismissed the claims of election rigging. The parliament was due to convene for the first time on February 1 when the military seized power, installed commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing as the country’s leader, declared a state of emergency and detained top NLD figures.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 165 people, mostly politicians, had been detained since February 1, with just 13 released. An Australian economist, Sean Turnell, who was advising the NLD-led government, has been arrested.

Protests have taken place in the country's second largest city of Mandalay and many towns and villages. Thousands reportedly marched in the southern city of Dawei and in Myitkyina, the state capital of Kachin in the north. In the town of Myawaddy, on Myanmar's eastern border with Thailand, police shot into the air to try to disperse a protest.

In Yangon, Kyaw, 58, a small shop owner cited by the *Guardian*, called for an end to the coup. "There are so many young educated people here, this is a revolution of the new generation," he said. He had participated in the 1988 uprising against the military dictatorship that involved not only mass protests but a huge strike movement of the working class.

The military is preparing for a new crackdown. A statement on state-run MRTV on Monday declared there had been violations of the law and threats of force by groups "using the excuse of democracy and human rights." It warned of unspecified action "against offences which disturb, prevent and destroy the state's stability, public safety and the rule of law." In areas of Yangon and Mandalay, the junta has imposed a curfew and banned gatherings of more than five people.

Now, as in 1988, the intervention of the working class is essential to the fight for democratic rights in Myanmar. It is, however, critical that such a movement should draw the necessary political lessons from the events in 1988, which ended with a bloody crackdown by troops that killed thousands.

The 1988 strike movement had brought the military to its knees. It relied on the bourgeois opposition led by Suu Kyi, who were just as terrified of the working class as the military, to call off the protests on the phony promises of an election in 1990. Her intervention provided the army with the opening to turn its guns on workers. Having stabilised the situation, the junta simply ignored its promise to hold the election and put Suu Kyi under house arrest.

Two decades later, the military again turned to Suu Kyi as it sought to mend relations with the US and its allies. It released her from house arrest in 2010 and allowed restricted elections under a new constitution,

paving the way for an easing of sanctions and for US President Barack Obama to visit Myanmar in 2016. Suu Kyi and the NLD were even allowed to form a government after winning the 2016 election.

However, the key levers of power have remained in the hands of the armed forces. Over the past five years, Suu Kyi has collaborated closely with the military, touring the world to encourage foreign investment, and acting as the chief apologist for its atrocities against the Muslim Rohingya minority. Like the military, her NLD is deeply imbued with anti-Rohingya chauvinism, branding them "illegal immigrants" to justify their complete lack of civil rights.

The NLD represents layers of the capitalist class who are hostile to the military's political and economic domination, but who are equally fearful of social unrest, particularly of the working class. As she has before, Suu Kyi will seek to exploit the protest movement against the junta to strike a new deal with the military at the expense of working people.

Workers can defend their democratic and social rights only by politically breaking from Suu Kyi and the NLD, and fighting for their own independent class interests on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective.



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