Protests and work stoppages continue in Myanmar against military coup

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Despite increased repression by the Myanmar junta, protests and strikes continued on Monday and Tuesday against the February 1 military coup after a weekend of widespread demonstrations. The protests are taking place in defiance of a ban on all gatherings of five or more people.

News is patchy as a result of heavy censorship. In an effort not only to control the news but also the ability of protesters to organise, the regime virtually shut down internet services on Sunday and Monday nights. British-based Netblocks reported that as of 1 a.m. Myanmar time on Tuesday morning, the country was "in the midst of a near-total internet shutdown."

Nevertheless, the limited coverage gives a clear indication of continuing protests, not only in the major cities, but in many regional cities and towns.

Associated Press reported that soldiers and police attacked more than 1,000 protesters on Monday in front of the Myanmar Economic Bank in Mandalay, the country's second largest city. Police reportedly fired warning shots into the air, while a number of people were injured by rubber bullets. Around 3,000 protesters, mainly students, returned to the city's streets on Tuesday.

A satellite image taken Tuesday and released via CNN showed a huge slogan written on a major road in Mandalay declaring "We want democracy."

Groups of demonstrators also mobilised in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, early on Tuesday. Police blocked off the street in front of the Central Bank, which has been targeted by protesters calling on bank employees to join the civil disobedience movement of work stoppages that is embracing growing sections of workers. The military has deployed armoured vehicles to the city's streets.

Reuters reported that protesters on Tuesday stood on the tracks of the main railway line, blocking trains between Yangon and the southern city of Mawlamyine. They chanted "Release our leaders immediately," and "People's power, give it back."

Hundreds of people marched through the west coast town of Thanked on Tuesday. Also yesterday, *Frontier Myanmar* reported that police fired rubber bullets at a protest of about 150 people outside the prison in the southern town of Myaungmya to demand the release of a local primary school headmaster.

The *Myanmar Times* reported that tens of thousands gathered on Monday in the township of Minbu, between Yangon and Mandalay, to rally against the junta. "More than 100,000 protestors comprising Hindus, Muslims, Mann oilfield and Htauk Shar Pin/Kanni oilfield workers and government staff took part in the protest today," a protest leader said. The protesters shouted slogans against military rule and called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint and other detained political leaders from the ousted elected government.

While the protests may not have been of the magnitude of those last weekend, there are growing signs of sections of the working class engaging in "civil disobedience" and refusing to work under the junta. According to Associated Press (AP): "The walkouts have been especially notable among government employees, including at the ministry that provides power nationwide, tax offices and the General Administration Department, which oversees a wide range of public services and government functions."

Dr. Kyaw Zin, a surgeon who led one of the nation's first walkouts at the government-run Mandalay General Hospital, told AP: "There is no way we can work under a dictatorship."

The *New York Times* cited an electricity lineman, U

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Pyae Sone Ko Ko, who said about 60 percent of Ministry of Electricity and Energy employees had walked off the job. He noted that a large number were meter readers, and if they did not do their jobs, the ministry could not send out bills. “We have to take part in the C.D.M. [civil disobedience movement] to stop the regime and take down the dictatorship,” he said.

The banks have also been affected. Daw Thandar Kyaw, a bank employee who joined the walkout, said: “If we stop going to work, the economic sector will stop working. Min Aung Hlaing and the military dictators care about the economy because they love money. I strongly believe that we can bring down the dictators if all bank staff join the C.D.M.”

Earlier reports referred to action by other sections of workers, including garment and transport workers. According to the *Myanmar Times*, 2,750 truck drivers from the Myanmar Container Trucks Association (MCTA) “suspended operations indefinitely” last Friday in support of the anti-junta protesters.

The MCTA stated: “The trucks will transport cargo deemed essential for the country and its people—such as medicines—but they have stopped running for other goods and materials. This is because the banks and ports are closed.”

If the military has not simply turned its guns on protesters, as it has in the past, it is because it fears an explosion of opposition in the working class. Social tensions are already high as a result of the deteriorating economy and social crisis facing many working people, compounded by a surging number of COVID-19 cases. Economic growth for 2020-21 is projected to be just 0.5 percent.

A recent meeting of the State Administrative Council, the military’s new ruling body, reflected the junta’s concerns. As reported in the *Global New Light of Myanmar*, it discussed taking legal action against protesters, providing “true information” to the media, and resuming public transport—a reference to strikes and slowdowns by truck drivers and railway workers.

All the signs indicate that a powerful movement of the working class is developing in Myanmar in opposition to the coup and in defence of democratic and social rights. Its great political weakness, however, is its orientation to Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD), which do not represent the interests of working people, but those of a faction of the ruling class whose business interests and political ambitions have been stifled by the military.

Amid the uprising against the military in 1988, during which strikes by workers paralysed the economy, the junta relied on Suu Kyi to bring the mass movement to a halt. She called for an end to the protests in exchange for an empty promise by the military to hold elections in 1990. The armed forces seized the opportunity to turn their guns on protesters, killing hundreds. Having secured their grip on power, they refused to hold the promised election.

Facing a movement of the working class, Suu Kyi and the NLD are far more fearful of the threat it poses to bourgeois rule, than they are of military repression. The fight for democracy by the working class is intimately bound up with the struggle against the capitalist system for a socialist reorganisation of society to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy elites—whether the military chiefs or their “democratic” rivals.

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