

Myanmar military fires on protesting shipyard workers, killing two

Owen Howell
22 February 2021

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets yesterday in Myanmar to protest against the military junta after troops opened fire on shipyard workers and their supporters in the city of Mandalay on Saturday, killing two people. Despite the regime's escalating use of violence, protests and strikes are continuing against the seizure of power by the military on February 1.

Saturday's confrontation took place at Yadanabon dock, where a large crowd of shipyard workers and others from the working class area gathered. Sailors had occupied a ship and prevented it from setting off to the city of Bhamo, some 300 kilometres up the Irrawaddy River. The protesters built makeshift barricades to try to hold back police.

An estimated 500 police officers and soldiers set upon the crowd with tear gas and water cannons. Journalists were forced to escape after being targeted by projectiles. A video showed the police chasing protesters, hitting them with batons and arresting people. Police were seen beating elderly by-standers as well as protesters.

As the confrontation wore on, soldiers opened fire with live rounds. A doctor who witnessed the assault told Al Jazeera what then unfolded was a "war zone." One neighbourhood resident told the AFP news agency: "They beat and shot my husband and others. He was standing on the side and watching the protest but the soldiers took him away."

Two protesters died from bullet wounds. One was a 16-year-old boy, shot in the head, according to *Frontier Myanmar*. The other victim was shot in the chest and died en route to hospital. He was later identified by relatives as Thet Naing Win, 36, a carpenter.

An emergency worker told AFP 30 others were wounded, with half the injuries caused by live rounds. At least a dozen people were arrested. Severely injured

protesters held in police vans were denied emergency medical care.

Soldiers from 33rd Light Infantry Division were reportedly involved in the crackdown. The unit is notorious for atrocities against Rohingya Muslims in the western Rakhine state of the country in 2017. Significantly it was Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) government was deposed by the military, who sought to cover up and defend the actions of the army against the Rohingya.

Elsewhere in Mandalay, protests were also attacked, including a rally of 1,000 people led by medical university students. At one point, police reportedly fired upon a monastery near 40th Street that was being used by medical volunteers as a temporary place of refuge for the wounded.

The bloody crackdown in Mandalay, directed against workers, is part of intensifying military repression as the protest movement shows no sign of abating. Mass arrests were conducted on Friday in the northern city of Myitkina, Kachin State, after protests were crushed with considerable force two days in a row.

The death of a young woman, shot by police during a rally at the capital Naypyidaw, was announced on Friday as the first confirmed fatality. Nationwide marches erupted the next day to honour her memory. The woman, Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, 20, a grocery store worker, had been on life support in hospital for a week with little chance of recovery. While the military insisted live rounds were not used on the day, doctors confirmed that the wound was caused by a bullet.

Together with a near-total internet shutdown for six consecutive days, the government has employed heavy media censorship to conceal or distort the truth about the violence wreaked by the state. The pro-junta *Global*

New Light of Myanmar newspaper falsely claimed the Yadanabon strikers had instigated the violence, sabotaging vessels and assaulting police with sticks and knives.

This is in line with military spokesman Zaw Min Tun's baseless claims last Tuesday that the military's actions were embraced by the majority of the population, and that 40 million of the country's 53 million supported the coup.

In fact, the repressive measures now being adopted by the junta express, not confidence, but a desperate fear that broader sections of the working class are beginning to join the struggle against military dictatorship.

Hundreds of thousands of workers across the country protested on Wednesday in major cities and rural villages alike, in what were the largest gatherings since the coup. In Yangon, Myanmar's commercial capital, tens of thousands assembled at the Sule Pagoda, calling for the release of Suu Kyi, the detained leader of the ousted government.

Other crowds stopped their cars in the street in a mass "breakdown" intended to blockade off police. Aerial images showed Yangon streets painted with slogans such as "The military dictatorship must fall" and "We want democracy."

Workers for the state-run Myanma Railways in Mandalay declared their solidarity with the civil disobedience movement in a major work stoppage on Wednesday. That evening, after the 8 p.m. curfew, soldiers and police attacked the housing complex where the railway workers reside, in a bid to intimidate the striking workers. Numerous videos on social media showed muzzle flashes as gunshots rang out and rocks and slingshots hurled at the buildings, along with shouts of "Shoot, shoot!"

Al Jazeera journalist Tony Cheng, in Bangkok, reported: "The campaign of civil disobedience appears to be having a fairly profound impact—people are refusing to go to their jobs and that's affecting the transport systems and the banking systems particularly badly.

"We understand that the railways in Yangon are now effectively shut down. We've heard that flight schedules for domestic flights in Myanmar have closed down, with pilots refusing to turn up. Many civil servants are not going in to work, and while this is a huge problem for the general public, it is also a major

problem for the military."

Workers from these sectors form the vast majority of the 570 arrests made thus far, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group.

The protests continued yesterday, with thousands gathering in both Yangon and Mandalay. As reported by *Al Jazeera*, a young protester told the demonstration in Mandalay: "They aimed at the heads of unarmed civilians. They aimed at our future." Other protests were reported in Myitkyina, the central towns of Monywa and Bagan, and Dawei and Myeik in the south.

What has emerged is a powerful movement of workers across industries, in defence of democratic rights and against authoritarianism. But this movement can only advance on the basis of a break from Suu Kyi and her NLD, which represents a faction of Myanmar's bourgeoisie and is just as fearful as the military of the threat posed by the working class.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact