

How to fight for democracy in Myanmar

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The general strike and demonstrations against the military junta that erupted across Myanmar yesterday, in response to the killing of two protesters by soldiers in the city of Mandalay on Saturday, raises the critical question: what must be the political basis of the fight for democratic rights?

The protest movement against the February 1 military coup has reached a turning point. Significant sections of the country's working class have joined the national civil disobedience movement that is paralysing key sectors of the economy including banking, transport and the civil service.

Yesterday, work stoppages were joined by tens, or even hundreds of thousands of people in the two largest cities of Yangon and Mandalay, as well as in the capital Naypyidaw and many smaller cities and towns. According to CNN, these included the southeastern city of Dawei, in Shan state's Taunggyi, Ayeyarwady's Patheingyi city, Kachin state's Myittha, and in one of the country's poorest regions of Chin state.

Under conditions of heavy media censorship, the full extent of the strikes is not known. However, various media sources reported that many shops and businesses were closed. According to the *New York Times*, "The general strike on Monday encompassed civil servants, bank workers, doctors, supermarket cashiers, telecom operators and oil rig operators. Pizza deliverers, KFC employees and bubble tea servers joined in, too."

The workers defied a heavy military and police presence on the streets, including armoured vehicles and snipers. The junta has detained hundreds of people under its draconian laws and has attempted to blame protesters for the violence.

It was heavily armed troops, however, who opened fire on Saturday, with live rounds directed at shipyard workers in Mandalay and their supporters from the neighbouring working class area. Police and soldiers were attempting to force the workers to man a ship that was due to depart. Two people, including a 16-year-old youth, were killed and some 30 others were injured.

On Sunday, large crowds attended a funeral in Naypyidaw for a young woman, Mya Thweh Thweh Khine, who died on Friday after being shot in the head during an anti-coup protest the previous week.

The demands of the protest movement are for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of her National League for Democracy (NLD), who were to form government on February 1 after overwhelmingly winning last November's national election.

The fight for democratic rights, however, is bound up with far broader political issues. The election and plans to install an NLD-led government were themselves the result of a rotten compromise between Suu Kyi and the military, overseen by US imperialism and its allies over the past decade.

The Obama administration, as part of its "pivot to Asia," directed against China, was determined to coax Myanmar's military dictatorship away from Beijing. The junta, anxious to end the crippling sanctions and diplomatic isolation, freed Suu Kyi in 2010 and staged elections under a constitution that ensured that it retained the key levers of power—powers that the military exercised on February 1.

Suu Kyi, long hailed in the West as a "democratic icon," put her seal of approval on this political farce, acting as an international envoy for the so-called "emerging democracy" in pressing for the removal of sanctions and for much-needed international investment. Mired in Burmese nationalism, Suu Kyi and the NLD defended the gross abuse of the democratic rights of the Muslim Rohingya minority and the military's atrocities that drove hundreds of thousands to flee.

The working class can place no faith in Suu Kyi and the NLD to defend democratic rights. They represent a faction of the bourgeoisie in Myanmar whose political ambitions and economic interests have been trampled on by the military, which controls substantial sections of the economy. While the NLD wants to end or at least limit the military's power, it is just as fearful as the generals of a mass movement of the working class that threatens the

very basis of capitalist rule.

Yesterday's general strike and protests were declared by participants to be the "Five Twos" or 22222 strike, referring to the date. But this is also meant to recall the mass uprising of 1988—in particular, August 8, 1988, or the 8888 strike, the high point of a strike movement against the military junta, which responded by gunning down hundreds of protesters in the streets.

A crucial political lesson needs to be learnt by those fighting for democratic rights today. It was not the military's guns that defeated the huge strikes and protests of 1988, but the political cowardice and treachery of Suu Kyi and the NLD.

The killings of August 8, 1988 were followed by an outpouring of anger and opposition. Economic activity ground to a halt amid widespread work stoppages. In Yangon, whole neighbourhoods were controlled by opposition committees. In the countryside farmers began to raise their demands.

On August 12, the junta leader resigned without explanation. His replacement sought to conciliate by ending martial law and offering a referendum on multi-party rule. As national protests continued to grow, in the face of these desperate maneuvers, Suu Kyi stepped in to act as a brake on the mass movement that had brought the junta to the brink of collapse. On August 26, speaking to a crowd of half a million, she urged people to "try to forget what has already taken place" and "not to lose their affection for the army."

Suu Kyi's intervention provided the junta with the critical breathing space that it desperately needed. She urged the protesters to place their faith in the junta's promise of elections and right up to a military crackdown on September 18, called for them to be "patient." Instead, the military declared martial law and ordered troops to crush the demonstrations. Thousands were killed and many more were detained or fled.

Elections were held in 1990, which the NLD won in a landslide, but having stabilized its rule, the military dismissed the result and placed Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders under arrest.

The actions of Suu Kyi and the NLD were not a mistake or an aberration. Rather, as Leon Trotsky established in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development, such as Burma, is organically incapable of meeting the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people.

The tragic historical experiences of the last century have

demonstrated time and again that faced with a mass movement that threatens to undermine bourgeois rule, the capitalist class will come together to support the crushing of protests and strikes through the most ruthless methods. The only social force capable of carrying out a consistent struggle for democratic rights is the working class as part of the broader struggle to refashion society to meet the pressing needs of the majority—that is, along socialist lines.

As in 1988, workers and youth in Myanmar should develop their own independent forms of organization and turn to their class brothers and sisters internationally. The deepening crisis of capitalism globally is fuelling a resurgence of the class struggle around the world as is evident, for example, in neighbouring Thailand where protests have resumed against the military-backed government.

In Yangon yesterday, some protesters gathered outside the US embassy, waving banners that read "Help Myanmar." US imperialism has not the slightest interest in defending democratic rights in Myanmar or anywhere else for that matter. Washington's hypocritical invocations of "human rights" in Myanmar are solely aimed at countering the country's renewed ties with Beijing. Rather than pleading for the US to help Myanmar, workers need to appeal to the international working class for support.

Above all, the working class needs to construct a political party that will fight for this revolutionary perspective, underpinned by the Theory of Permanent Revolution. That means building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International which alone embodies all of the strategic experiences of the international Trotskyist movement. We urge workers and youth to contact us to discuss these crucial political issues.



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