Workers across Myanmar stage general strike against military dictatorship

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Protests against the military junta have continued in Myanmar following a huge outpouring of opposition on Monday in the form of protests and strikes following the killing of two protesters in Mandalay on Saturday. Yesterday groups of demonstrators gathered outside the Thai and Indonesian embassies while groups from the country's various ethnic minorities protested on the streets of Yangon.

The general strike by workers on Monday graphically demonstrated the scope and depth of the political opposition to the military's seizure of power on February 1. Along with numerous news sources, the protest leadership—a loosely organised group called the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)—reported on its Twitter account that millions of people nationwide participated in the demonstrations and work stoppages.

Due to stringent media censorship regulated by the military junta, the exact scale and composition of the strikes is unclear. However, it is apparent that the protests, dubbed the "22222 [or Five Twos] Popular Uprising," referring to the date on which it took place, were the largest since the coup.

It is significant that ever wider sections of the working class are joining the struggle against the junta, from doctors, civil servants, and bank employees to supermarket workers and oil rig operators.

The strike was organised in the wake of a bloody state crackdown on Saturday against striking shipyard workers and demonstrators in Mandalay. Police and military forces fired live rounds on a crowd of protesters, leaving two dead from gunshot wounds, including a 16-year-old boy, and about 30 injured.

In preparation for Monday's strike, authorities constructed barricades and barbed wire at strategic locations in Myanmar's cities, such as embassies which have become gathering points for some protesters calling for foreign intervention. Streets were patrolled by armoured vehicles and snipers deployed on downtown rooftops.

Businesses throughout the urban and regional centres announced closures, including markets, restaurants, shops, and roadside vendors. The shutdown was also embraced by international chains such as KFC and delivery service Foodpanda. Southeast Asian ride-hailing company Grab halted its delivery services.

In Yangon, the country's largest city, where commercial activity has been increasingly paralysed by the CDM movement, huge crowds flooded the streets of the Sule, Hledan, and Myaynigone areas, *Frontier Myanmar* reported. People chanted slogans such as, "Don't go to the office, break away!"

The second largest city, Mandalay, was also brought to a standstill by the broad extent of the strikes, as hundreds of thousands were mobilised across work sectors. Similarly large demonstrations were held in the smaller towns of Myitkina, Hpaan, Pyinmana, Dawei and Bhamo.

Health workers have comprised a significant section of the CDM since its origin, with nearly one-third of Myanmar's public hospitals no longer functioning. As of Tuesday, the Emergency Department of Yangon General Hospital, the city's best-equipped medical facility, was totally deserted. In place of public hospitals, doctors and nurses aligned with the movement have established free medical clinics across the country.

Although the police response throughout the day was relatively muted in the face of huge crowds, in some cases violence was used to disperse gatherings. Attempts to break up the Yangon protests involved a long line of police in riot gear setting upon a massive procession near the Shwedagon Pagoda. As protesters

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retreated, nearby commuters came to their aid and formed a blockade with their cars, preventing police from moving forward.

The crackdown on mass rallies at the capital Naypyidaw was especially violent. Videos on social media showed security personnel using water cannons and wrestling protesters to the ground in neighbouring townships of Zabuthiri and Pyinmana, in an effort to block demonstrators from marching into the capital. Major entry points to Naypyidaw were heavily guarded by military personnel, after calls on the weekend for an organised march on central government buildings.

Witnesses spoke to the *Irrawaddy* about the incident. A reporter who escaped the scene said soldiers and police tried to seize cameras from journalists and targeted them for arrest. An engineering student who joined the protest said: “They fired three times while they were trying to break us up. My two friends were beaten and taken away. I managed to run away… They targeted young people.”

Amid the onslaught, hundreds of protesters were forced to hide in nearby houses and monasteries long after the crackdown. A total of 193 mostly young protesters linked to the Naypyidaw rallies have since been arrested and are detained in a military compound outside the capital.

The protests on Monday went ahead despite ominous threats from the junta of violence. Late Sunday, the government issued a warning on state-run television network MRTV: “It is found that the protesters have raised their incitement towards riot and anarchy mob on the day of 22 February. Protesters are now inciting the people, especially emotional teenagers and youths, to a confrontation path where they will suffer the loss of life.”

The Foreign Ministry claimed in a statement prior to Monday that despite “unlawful demonstrations, incitements of unrest and violence, the authorities concerned are exercising utmost restraint through minimum use of force to address the disturbances.”

As the anti-coup movement has grown over the past three weeks, the military is insisting that the protests are the work of “notorious ex-criminal” agitators and blamed protesters for attack on security forces. Its ministries and official publications have falsely claimed that the majority of Myanmar’s population supported the coup, which ousted the government of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) after winning last November’s election in a landslide.

Many protesters on Monday scrawled messages on their arms with their blood type and emergency contact numbers, in anticipation of potential injury or death at the hands of a military crackdown.

In the aftermath of the general strike, the military regime has expanded its repressive measures in a desperate bid to halt the movement. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners revealed that at least 684 people have been arrested so far, while nearly 600 remain in detention.

Meanwhile, in a move clearly aimed at blocking workers’ ability to organise the strike, the internet suffered widespread service outages and disruption on Sunday night, with NetBlocks reporting a 13 percent drop from usual internet usage levels.

The military has also released oppressive new guidelines for media outlets, further restricting press freedom and the release of information on protests. Publications will now lose their publishing licenses for referring to the military “regime” or “junta.”

Coup leader General Min Aung Hlaing said on Monday that measures must be taken to “regulate the press in accordance with press ethics,” while the Ministry of Information sent new directives this week to the Myanmar Press Council, calling for journalists to avoid “instigating public unrest.”

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