Myanmar’s military junta targets striking railway workers

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Strikes and protests are continuing after Monday’s widespread work stoppages throughout Myanmar. A police raid on the staff compound of 800 striking railway workers in Yangon on Wednesday gives a small glimpse of the opposition of the working class to the February 1 military coup. The workers had joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which encompasses broad sections of doctors, civil servants, bank staff as well as transport, garment and electricity workers.

Police sealed off the Mingalar Taung Nyunt neighbourhood in Yangon early on Wednesday morning where the Ma Hlwa Kone train station and housing for railway workers are located. A woman who lives on the site told the AFP news agency that “around 300 security personnel are blocking the road searching for the people who are involved in the civil disobedience movement.” She escaped but expressed concerns for the workers “because they [the police] could beat and kill them.”

The workers had barricaded themselves into the compound. A Facebook live broadcast showed people chanting: “Are we staff united? Yes, we are united.” A commentator said that police were trying to remove barricades and threatening to shoot. Other eyewitnesses reported that the security forces were seizing supplies donated to the striking workers.

One person tweeted: “Currently Yangon, Ma Hlwa Gone Railway station is like a lockdown!! The Junta’s Terrorist police and military blocked all the streets and ways out, arrested the CDM workers and robbed rice that were donated for CDM workers! Residents are trying to move out the elderly!!”

At least three arrests were reported.

The events at Ma Hlwa Gone Railway station are a microcosm of the far broader movement against the junta. The confrontation took place after 18 unions and workers’ associations issued a statement last weekend calling for extended nationwide work stoppages from Monday to demand an end to military rule.

Well before the appeal by the unions, the Civil Disobedience Movement had drawn in broad layers of the working class as well as aid and support from others. The movement is having a significant impact on sections of the economy and the functioning of the junta, which has responded with increasingly brutal repression—nightly searches and arrests, the shooting down of protesters, and the torture and murder of prisoners.

A *Wall Street Journal* article noted: “While the young are playing a critical role, the resistance is drawing from all layers of Myanmar society, helped by an array of organizations. These organizations are combined forces of student and labor unions, civil-society groups and other networks with longstanding connections allowing for fast transmission of plans, particularly through social media. Adding to that are striking civil servants and state employees—electrical and railways workers, banking staff, doctors and others—threatening to bring government to a standstill.”

Some of the country’s 600,000 garment workers, many of whom are women, have also been involved in the stoppages. An AFP video shows a group of garment workers in Yangon’s Hlaing township who have been engaged in protests against the junta since the coup on February 1. Their leader, Khine Mar New, a 26-year-old mother, said that the oppressive conditions in the factory taught her the importance of standing up for her rights.

Protests continued on Wednesday in cities and towns across the country, including Yangon, Mandalay, Monywa, Dawei, Myitkyina, Bago, Kalaw and

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Myingyan, despite the ongoing crackdown by security forces. In Yangon's North Okkalapa district, press and social media reports indicated that at least 200 people were arrested.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which is monitoring arrests, says that at least 60 people are thought to have been killed in the crackdowns and nearly 2,000 arrested. The figures are almost certainly an underestimate amid reports of security forces taking bodies off the streets in order to cover up their criminal activities. In an indication of sharp divisions in their ranks, a number of police have refused to fire on unarmed protesters and have fled to India.

The media has been a particular target as the junta seeks to stifle any independent reporting. The *Myanmar Now* news agency has reported that at least 35 journalists have been arrested since the coup, of which 19 have been released. The *Mizzima* news website has since reported that the Yangon offices of *Myanmar Now* were subjected to a nighttime raid by security forces who seized computers and other equipment. The junta has revoked the publishing and broadcasting licences of *Mizzima* and four other news outlets. On Tuesday afternoon, the co-founder of *Kamayut Media* and a colleague were arrested in Yangon.

Also on Tuesday, Zaw Myat Linn, an official from the ousted National League for Democracy (NLD), died in custody after he was arrested. He is the second NLD official to die in police custody. On Sunday, local NLD official, Khin Maung Latt, died while being held by police from injuries indicating he had been severely tortured.

The NLD overwhelmingly won national elections held last November and was about to form the next government on February 1 when the army seized power on the basis of false allegations of electoral fraud. NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD figures were arrested and continue to be held.

Shortly after the coup, a group of elected NLD parliamentarians formed the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which denounced the military's actions as illegal and has established what it describes as a provisional government. On February 15, the military regime charged 17 CRPH members with incitement under the penal code that carries a sentence of up to two years jail.

On Tuesday, the CRPH issued a statement announcing that it had appointed Mahn Win Khaing Than, who is in hiding, as acting vice president to perform the duties of arrested President Win Myint and NLD leader Suu Kyi. It has previously announced the appointment of ministers in the provisional government. The CRPH is appealing to the major powers to intervene with sanctions to pressure the military to make concessions.

Neither the NLD nor the CRPH is committed to defending the democratic and social rights of working people in Myanmar. Suu Kyi has collaborated with the military for a decade, covering up their crimes against the Muslim Rohingya minority and appealing for foreign investment to exploit the country's cheap labour. A genuine struggle for democratic rights requires a political fight against the capitalist system that is the source of the oppression of working people.

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