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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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10.03.2021

Widespread work stoppages in Myanmar against February 1 military coup

Large protests took place yesterday in Myanmar's major cities, including Yangon and Mandalay, and towns across the country, demanding an end to military rule. Shops, businesses, factories and government offices remained shut following a call for an extended nationwide work stoppage. Thousands joined the demonstrations despite bloody repression by the army and police over the past week that has claimed at least 60 lives.



Protesters take positions behind a makeshift barricade as armed riot policemen gather in Yangon, Myanmar, Monday, March 8, 2021. (AP Photo)

On Sunday night, security forces occupied at least 20 government universities, schools and hospitals, including in Yangon, Mandalay, Magway, Monywa and Ayeyarwady.

According to the *Irrawaddy*, police and soldiers opened fire and used percussion grenades in a bid to intimidate people who had gathered outside a teaching hospital in the North Oakkalapa Township of Yangon to oppose its use by the military.

Under conditions of heavy censorship, including the detention of dozens of journalists since the February 1 coup, details of yesterday's strikes and protests are sketchy.

The *Bangkok Post* reported: "From Monday morning, workers and other protesters marched in the streets of such major cities as Yangon and Mandalay, according to local media. Most banks remained closed even though Myanmar's central bank had urged them to resume operations."

According to *Nikkei Asia*: "Most banks and businesses [in Yangon] were closed on Monday and transport remained largely suspended as more companies, local and foreign, said they were halting their operations. Danish shipping giant A.P. Moller-Maersk, which handles significant cargo in and out of Yangon, said it had suspended all operations for at least a week until March 14."

France 24 reported that two protesters had been killed when security forces fired stun grenades, tear gas and live rounds in the northern town of Myitkyina. A witness told Reuters that the two had been shot in the head and died on the spot. A third person was killed during a protest in the town of Phyar Pon in the Irrawaddy Delta, according to local media.

France 24 cited witnesses in Yangon who reported that "only a few small tea-shops were open... Major shopping centres were closed and there was no work going on at factories." It also reported that protests in the southern town of Dawei took place under the protection of the Karen National Union, one of the country's armed ethnic groups that have been engaged in long-running conflicts with the military.

A grouping of 18 trade union federations and workers' associations issued a joint call on Sunday for "an extended nationwide work stoppage to save our democracy." The unions covering industrial, agricultural, garment, transport, railway, mining and energy workers appealed to civic leaders and workers, union and non-union, to join the strikes.

“To continue economic and business activities as usual, and to delay a general work-stoppage, will only benefit the military as they repress the energy of the Myanmar people. The time to take action in defense of our democracy is now,” the statement declared. It called for an expansion of the widespread Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) to implement a “full extended shutdown of the Myanmar economy.”

The CDM, which began among government teachers, medical staff and civil servants, has impacted on the ability of the junta to operate. A *Frontier Myanmar* article published yesterday explained that although the CDM “has come to encompass street protests and public boycotts of military-owned products, at its core is a strike by tens of thousands of public servants, which began among medics two days after the coup.

“Across the country, doctors, nurses, teachers, railway workers and staff from a range of government ministries and enterprises have been refusing to go to work, in order to make it impossible for the new junta to govern. They have been joined by private sector employees in sectors such as banking and transport that are considered crucial to the regime’s survival.”

The article explained that the movement had been partly inspired by uprisings internationally, particular in Tunisia in 2010 and 2011. While difficult to gauge the overall extent of participation, a deputy director general at the Ministry of Electricity and Energy told *Frontier Myanmar* that between 50 and 90 percent of all staff across the ministry’s 11 departments had joined the CDM, which may have contributed to a nationwide power cut on March 5.

The junta, which is desperate to end the rebellion among civil servants, issued another threat over the weekend to sack anyone who did not turn up to work on Monday. A physician told *Frontier Myanmar*: “I don’t care if I face action for my decision; I’m ready to face the worst. The goal is to fight for the return of an elected government. We will continue with CDM until that happens.”

The widespread stoppages reported yesterday were testimony to the determination of the working class to resist military rule in the face of increasingly brutal repression. Protesters are being shot and killed or injured in the streets, while the security forces conduct nightly raids and arrests of activists. On Sunday, a local official for the ousted National League for

Democracy (NLD), Khin Maung Latt, died in police custody from injuries that strongly suggested that he had been severely tortured.

Workers and young people have displayed considerable courage in the face of heavily armed police and troops, as has been the case in the previous revolts against military rule. The fatal weaknesses of the past protest movements has been their political domination by the NLD and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who fears the threat posed by a mass movement of the working class to bourgeois rule more than she does the Burmese generals.

In 1988, a huge strike movement brought the military junta, which had ruled the country for decades, to its knees. Suu Kyi, hailed in the West as a “democracy icon,” played the crucial role allowing the military to suppress the working class. At the high point of the movement, Suu Kyi intervened to urge protesters to put their faith in the military’s promise of elections and “not to lose their affection for the army.” Her actions provided the military with a much-needed breathing space to prepare a savage crackdown in which thousands were killed. Having stabilised its rule, the military ignored the results of the 1990 election and arrested Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders.

For the past decade, after a US-engineered deal with the military, Suu Kyi and the NLD have functioned as the political front for the military. While nominally the NLD formed the government after the 2016 election, the military retained the levers of power—by stacking the parliament with its appointees and retaining control of key ministries including defence, the police and borders. Suu Kyi infamously defended the army’s atrocities against the Muslim Rohingya minority.

Workers can place no faith in Suu Kyi and her NLD, which represent a rival faction of the bourgeoisie to the military, nor for that matter the trade unions, which, while opposed to the junta, are seeking to divert the rising tide of opposition into the arms of the NLD. The fight for genuine democratic rights is bound up with the struggle for the social rights of the working class, which confronts a deepening economic and social crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires the building of independent organisations of the working class and a fight for socialism in Myanmar and internationally.

World Socialist 09.03.2021