



## My country needs you: No cooperation, no recognition and no business with the military junta in Myanmar

**Khaing Zar Aung**

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military overthrew the civilian government headed by the National League for Democracy and refused to allow elected Parliamentarians to take their seats and form a civilian government. Since then, the military has waged war against the people. The generals want to turn back the clock and return to the dark times of dictatorship. They have no vision for the future of our country. The people of Myanmar, young and old, from all walks of life, have a vision: freedom, democracy and human rights. You all will see that they are ready to give whatever it takes to achieve it. But they need the international community and global business to stand with them.

### **Brave and non-violent: the civil disobedience movement**

With numbers growing day by day, hundreds of thousands of protesters, led by the youth from all walks of life and including students, workers, civil service personnel and private entrepreneurs, are taking to the streets asking for the release of their democratically elected leaders, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, and the restoration of democracy. On 22 February 2021 an estimated eight to ten million people across the country joined a general strike and mass demonstrations for this cause. As part of a massive civil disobedience movement across the country, civil servants, pilots, train drivers, doctors, garment workers and many others are no longer showing up for work.

The military has declared martial law and is growing increasingly violent against peaceful pro-democracy protesters. They use water cannons, teargas, slingshots, rubber bullets and live bullets. At least four peaceful protesters have been shot by the military. One, only 16 years old, was shot while trying to rescue injured people from a protest site in Mandalay. Dozens have been seriously injured. First aid volunteers are reported to have been targeted for trying to help injured protesters.

The regime has released more than 23 000 criminals from prison who are now terrorizing the population through arson, poisoning water supplies and threatening people at night. Military and police forces arrest those joining the civil disobedience movement night after night. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are banned, and telecom providers are regularly forced to shut down the entire internet. The country's democratically elected leaders remain arrested, along with more than 600 political prisoners. The military is asking factory

owners to disclose the names and addresses of trade union leaders to arrest them and is going door to door in the worker dormitories and hostels searching for them. Central executive committee members and key trade union leaders of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM) and affiliated unions had to go into hiding after the military issued a secret list of 27 trade union leaders to be persecuted under penal code 505.

None of this stops the peaceful movement for democracy, which counts on the world to support them. The military wants to return to open dictatorship. At the same time they want international business to stay. They want to protect their interests and continue to enrich themselves. We now need a clear and unwavering signal from the international community, governments, businesses and international civil society: no business with, no cooperation with and no diplomatic recognition of the junta.

### **The role of companies: no business with the junta**

As the CTUM and IWFU, we ask trade unions and civil society organisations around the world to join us in calling on global companies operating in Myanmar to:

- *Issue a public condemnation of the military coup in Myanmar.* What happened on 1 February is a coup. The talk of the military that they only acted to protect the constitution and to ensure fair elections are blatant lies. There is no justification for what they are trying to do. A coup needs to be called a coup.
- *Issue a public statement that the military coup, if continued, will have a negative effect on future international investments and on the Myanmar economy and social development.* The military thinks they can silence their people by brutal force. And they believe that international business wants to continue earning money in Myanmar. Global companies need to say loud and clear that this will not happen. They need to make it clear that they need human rights and civil rights to be respected if they are to stay in Myanmar. They need to show the military that they will drive international investment out of the country if they continue with the coup.
- *Exercise due diligence to ensure there are no business or investment ties that are directly owned by or associated with the military in the supply chain.* We need rigorous due diligence

from all companies, and we need business to say publicly that they are living up to their due diligence obligations. Now is the time for companies to show that their corporate social responsibility talk is more than just words.

- *Ensure that their business activities and suppliers do not contribute to or aggravate human rights violations.* Ensure that no worker or union leader will be punished for joining the demonstrations against the coup. Global companies need to require their suppliers do not dismiss or punish workers for joining the demonstrations. They also need to make it clear that they won't accept it if suppliers denounce workers or union leaders to the police or military forces.

- *Issue a public statement that their suppliers will not suffer from penalties or other economic consequences for late delivery or other breaches of contracts related to the demonstrations.* Suppliers will only refrain from punishing workers for participating in the demonstrations if they are reassured that they in turn will not be punished by their global buyers. The behaviour of global buyers in the Covid-19 pandemic has eroded suppliers' trust in responsible purchasing practices by brands. Global companies need to publicly commit to it now, so that suppliers can do the right thing.

The people of Myanmar are not striking against companies. They are striking against a military junta that is putting the future of the people and the country in danger. If the movement succeeds, it will also be a success for Myanmar as a globally integrated production location.

We need global companies to do at least the above five points. Global companies that are staying silent now are signalling to the military that they will also stay in the country under a military dictatorship as long as the prices are attractive. This is unacceptable.

#### **The role of governments: no recognition and no cooperation**

CTUM is calling on national governments, national and international trade unions and civil society organisations to support the workers who voted in the democratic election in November 2020 by:

- Implementing comprehensive economic sanctions to stop any and all revenue to the military;
- Supporting the people of Myanmar when we request that the European Union should withdraw the Everything but Arms (EBA) preferential trade status from Myanmar;
- Supporting the people of Myanmar when we request that international financial institutions should freeze all activities within Myanmar – as all activities with the ministries mean you are supporting the coup;
- Supporting the people of Myanmar when we request the United Nations General Assembly to keep the Myanmar seat

vacant until the elected representatives can form a parliament and a government.

Governments, international organisations, businesses, and civil society need to make the junta understand that the coup is putting all trade preferences and foreign relations at risk. The European Union's Everything but Arms (EBA) agreement gives preferential trade status to developing countries that are respecting and promoting democracy and human rights. Myanmar has benefitted from the EBA status since 2012; it has helped to create hundreds of thousands of jobs for garment workers.

My trade union, IWFM, one the largest sectoral trade unions, has worked relentlessly to protect the rights and improve the lives of garment workers and their families since we were allowed back into the country after the previous dictatorship, back in 2012. Our confederation, CTUM, is the only registered trade union confederation at national level and the most representative with more than 67 000 members across seven sectoral federations, spanning agriculture and farmers, manufacturing, building and wood, mining sector, transportation seafarers, the food sector and the energy sector.

CTUM and IWFM are standing by our members and all the people of Myanmar who are peacefully protesting for their democratic rights. The withdrawal of the EBA would hit us hard. Jobs would be lost, and our survival may be put at risk. But what will put our lives and our futures more at risk than anything else is the military dictatorship. We have been there and we know what it means.

The people of Myanmar have shown that they are ready to give whatever it takes to achieve freedom and democracy. We need to build the highest possible pressure on the military to achieve this. And we need you – workers, citizens, businesses and governments of the world – to help us with that.

Together, Myanmar's people and the international community can bring back democracy. Through civil disobedience, protest and strikes, the people of Myanmar are speaking up clearly and loudly. We need the international community to do the same. We need you to stand by our side to make this coup collapse.

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## **Global Labour Column**

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