**Support the sanctions against the Burmese military regime!**

An interview with Phyo Sandar, Assistant General Secretary of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM)

In February, the Myanmar military staged a coup. Since then, Burmese trade unions have been fighting the military junta. Trade unionists, such as Phyo Sandar, are risking their lives for democracy.

Sandar is the Assistant General Secretary of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM). The confederation’s different associations have around 65,000 members in various industries. Sandar has been involved in the trade union movement since 2006. She also participated in the past elections as a worker representative in the district level election disputes settlement committee. Now she has to live underground.

***Myanmar is currently the scene of a violent political turmoil. On the morning of 1 February, the military prevented the newly-elected government from assuming power and has once again seized power illegally. What happened?***

Phyo Sandar: After a long period of military dictatorship, Myanmar was finally on the path to democracy. Elections were held in November 2020. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won it clearly because many in Myanmar support the party under the leadership of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The voters just wanted a party that is independent from the military. But the military and its political parties refused to recognise the result of the elections. They spoke of so-called electoral fraud. This was their pretext for a military coup, similar to what they did in 1988.

***Did the trade unions supported Aung San Suu Kyi's party in the elections?***

No. The NLD failed to stand up for the workers and instead made policies for company owners. This is the reason why we ran for elections independent of the NLD. But as advocates of democracy for many years, we respected the NLD’s electoral victory and welcomed the newly-elected government.

However, the military led by General Min Aung Hlaing placed the leaders of the newly-elected government under house arrest and are now brought to trial. The country is now in a “state of emergency.”

What we called the “Spring Revolution” began on 1 February. The trade unions urged workers from both the public and private sectors to go on strike. We also organised large mass demonstrations. Millions of Burmese people took part in the strikes! Then the military decided to respond.

***And responded with violence?***

At first, they ignored the workers’ strikes organised by the CDM in the public sector. Then the military sent a letter to state officials asking workers to return to work. The military regime even promised promotions. But the strikers were not deterred. The military issued special orders, but we ignored them. At the beginning, they tried to break up our demonstrations with water cannons, but we continued with our strike. Then they used tear gas and rubber bullets against us. Then live bullets were used. Protesters and innocent bystanders were mostly shot in the head.

My family was also harassed. They broke into my parents' house. Fortunately, we were able to put them somewhere safe.

***And what are the capitalists doing?***

Many collaborated with the military. Some factories even collected the information of the striking workers, including their addresses, and passed them to the military.

***How should the struggle for democracy continue?***

We continue the fight for democracy by organising strikes and peaceful demonstrations. Meanwhile, other groups are preparing the transition to an armed struggle. The ousted democratically-elected government, which is operating in the country’s “safe zones,”  is also setting up its own army. Many of us assume that sooner or later, there will be a civil war in Myanmar. However, we will not be able to win this fight alone, not without international support.

***What support would help?***

Under no circumstances should the military regime be recognised. It should not be allowed to sit in the UN General Assembly and other similar international platforms.

As trade unionists, we also call on our colleagues abroad to support the call to impose sanctions against the military regime and the country’s economy. This measure is not easy for us. We know that sanctions will affect us all. But at the rate things are going, Burmese workers are already deprived of their rights.

Lastly, please make it clear to your governments that they should stop selling weapons to the military junta.