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Briefing Paper:

Targeted, Abused, Exploited: The Erosion of Labor Rights in Myanmar, 2021-2025

I. Introduction

The Myanmar military junta has created an unprecedented crisis for Myanmar's nearly 1 million garment workers—95 percent of them women—across Yangon, Bago, and Ayeyarwaddy Regions. Since its illegal coup attempt in 2021, the junta has dismantled labor protections by abolishing tripartite (workers, employers, and governments) mechanisms, criminalizing unions, and imprisoning labor activists or forcing them into exile. At the same time, the junta and the corporations with which it colludes have stripped workers of their rights and forced them to endure unsafe conditions, sexual assault, and other abuses in the workplace.

Employment has collapsed since the coup attempt, as the junta has driven Myanmar's economy into catastrophe. In December 2024 alone, approximately 10 factories closed. Those who remain employed face worsening precarity through informal contracts, irregular hours, abusive working conditions, and nearly nonexistent benefits. Alongside this dramatic increase in exploitation, workers now confront the real risks of the junta's forced conscription and coerced participation in the junta's sham election in December 2025.

II. Impacts of the junta's illegal sham election on workers in Myanmar

There is increasing evidence that garment workers are being exploited to prop up the junta's illegal sham election. The Solidarity of Trade Union Myanmar (STUM) reported that the junta is pressuring and threatening those detained in Insein Prison—including labor activist Myo Myo Aye while she was in prison—to cast advance votes for its sham election scheduled for 28 December 2025.¹ STUM highlighted that prisoners who refuse to cast an advance vote will have their refusal regarded as a vote of no confidence and will face solitary confinement or other severe punishments.

On 14 November 2025, while campaigning for the sham election, Aung Kyaw Hoe—who is the junta's current minister of labor and a member of the junta's proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party—visited factories in Hlaing Thar Yar Township, Yangon Region, and promised to protect workers' right to unionize, despite his complicity in the junta's ongoing union busting. This junta-backed campaign tactic is an attempt to instill false hope in workers and convince them to vote in the sham election.

III. Rights violations by the junta

<u>Persecution of labor unions and their leaders</u>: Since its coup attempt, the junta has cracked down on labor unions, including union leaders and organizers—arresting, charging, and threatening them—in an attempt to silence their voices. Shortly after the coup attempt, on 1 March 2021, the junta's immigration and manpower ministry banned 16 labor unions and labor activist organizations.³ Following this ban, the junta has arbitrarily arrested, charged, and sentenced union members and labor activists under Section 505 of the Penal Code⁴ and the Unlawful Association Act,⁵ raided their

homes, and seized laptops, phones, and other devices.⁶ These crackdowns have left workers increasingly vulnerable to abuse.

In April 2022, the junta arrested Khine Thinzar Aye, a member of the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM), after ramming the taxi she was in with a junta truck. She was detained along with two other union members and sentenced to three years in prison. While interrogating her, the junta tortured and sexually assaulted her to force her to reveal the whereabouts of trade union leaders. She stated, "When we arrived at the interrogation, we were blindfolded and handcuffed, then drunken men surrounded us and beat us and brutally cut our legs with knives."

Similarly, in 2021, the junta initially sentenced Ko Thet Hnin Aung, General Secretary of the Myanmar Industries Craft & Services Trade Union Federation, to two years in prison. The junta re-arrested him on the day of his release in 2023 and sentenced him to an additional seven years. He has reportedly been tortured in prison for reporting prison conditions to the junta-controlled Myanmar National Human Rights Commission and has sustained head injuries as a result of the abuse.⁹

In one of its latest crackdowns on labor rights groups, the junta arrested STUM leader Myo Myo Aye, her daughter Chue Thwel, and several other STUM staff members in July 2025. The junta also raided their offices and confiscated their electronic devices. ¹⁰ Myo Myo Aye was released on 20 October 2025 with a bond of 6 million Myanmar Kyats (MMK) (approximately USD 2,860). ¹¹ The junta placed her under monitoring for the following six months and has prohibited her from engaging in any activist work. The junta required seized electronic devices to be retrieved with a separate bond of MMK 6 million (USD 2,860), and the junta has ordered those devices and their data not to be sold, pawned, or destroyed. ¹² As of this writing, the junta is still detaining nine other STUM members.

<u>Arrests of workers for reporting violations</u>: In addition to its crackdown on labor unions, the junta also targets workers for reporting violations of their rights. On 24 March 2025, junta personnel—including local administrators and police from Hlawkar station—arrested workers from Shining Long garment factory in Shwe Pyi Thar Township, Yangon Region, after they filed complaints about the factory's violation of labor laws, including its failure to contribute to security payments, forced overtime on holidays without pay, and demotions for those who refused overtime work.¹³ Despite later releasing the workers from the ward office, junta personnel further intimidated the workers, barring them from taking their complaints to other organizations and warning that their names had already been added to the junta's list for forced conscription.

<u>Forced conscription</u>: Workers have been primary targets of the junta's forced conscription campaign, which began in February 2024. That same month, a factory worker from Hlaing Thar Yar Township reported that a factory owner was colluding with the junta to recruit workers, forcing workers to draw lots and promising two months' salary to those who were selected for conscription. ¹⁴ Moreover, across Yangon's industrial zone, the junta-controlled department of labor "collecting worker data from factories across Yangon's industrial zones while also conducting on-ground recruitment campaigns." ¹⁵

Workers face heightened risks of being targeted for conscription by junta recruiters when working overtime and returning home after dark. For example, on 2 September 2025, in Wundwin Township, Mandalay Region, the junta abducted three workers and a factory owner as part of its conscription campaign. Furthermore, a worker from New Fubon garment factory told *Myanmar Labour News* (MLN), "...we've had to work until 9 PM or even 11:30 PM every night. We often encounter [junta soldiers] and face harassment, inspections and questioning after finishing overtime and heading home." 17

As of November 2025, the junta has forcibly recruited 17 batches of conscripts, claiming to have 5,000 conscripts per batch—though the total number of forced conscripts remains unclear. Many of them are likely industrial workers, as the junta has blatantly and repeatedly targeted this demographic for forced conscription. The junta sends its forcibly conscripted recruits to the frontline as human shields. 19

<u>Wage exploitation</u>: Inflation has soared under the junta, while minimum daily wages have remained stagnant such that workers cannot meet their most basic needs. The current minimum wage of only MMK 7,800 (approximately USD 3.72) is far from enough to cover essential food, clothing, and housing.²⁰ This amount includes the basic minimum wage of MMK 4,800 (approximately USD 2.30) for an eight-hour work day—which was established in 2018 and has remained unchanged since despite legal requirements for it to be increased every two years—and MMK 3,000 of additional daily allowances.²¹ According to a survey conducted by STUM, workers need a minimum daily wage of MMK 12,000–17,000 (approximately USD 5.72–8.09) to meet basic living standards.²² As a result, many workers are forced to work overtime to earn enough money to survive. A garment factory worker told *MLN*, "If I don't work overtime, I won't earn enough to live on. I must work overtime because I will earn extra money."²³

<u>Lack of social security benefits despite worker contributions</u>: Social security benefits for workers have become practically nonexistent since the coup attempt, and workers are exploited or threatened when trying to access such protections.²⁴ Despite workers being required to contribute 2% and employers 3% of total salaries to the junta-run social security fund, the system fails to function effectively, and workers do not receive benefits commensurate with their required contributions. The junta—through its ministry of labor's social security board—is most likely misappropriating these funds for its own use in its nearly five-year terror campaign against the people.²⁵

A factory worker told *MLN*, "Getting the benefits we're supposed to receive from [the junta's health system] is a struggle. For instance, the only thing we can really rely on is getting a medical certificate to apply for sick leave. Even though we pay our monthly contributions, the reality is that things don't work as they should."²⁶ Another worker also told *MLN*, "...even when we do visit, there's often no medicine available at the clinics. For minor illnesses, I end up having to pay out of pocket at private clinics because of the delays and shortages at Social Security clinics."²⁷

Forced closures of private entities in retaliation against the Civil Disobedience Movement: Starting on 1 March 2025, the junta ordered 16 private hospitals and clinics in Yangon and Mandalay Regions to temporarily close for employing workers who had joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). ²⁸ Two years prior, in January 2023, the junta similarly ordered five private hospitals in Mandalay to shut down for employing CDM workers. ²⁹ According to *Radio Free Asia*, Kant Kaw Hospital and City Hospital reopened on 18 January 2024. ³⁰

IV. Rights violations by companies

<u>Crackdowns on unions and freedom of association</u>: In collusion with the junta, factory owners and management exploit the climate of fear to tighten their grip on workers. Those who attempt to organize trade unions face threats, wage cuts, and dismissals, while efforts to report abuse are silenced through intimidation. For example, in Yangon Region, some factory workers were fired for demanding full payment of minimum wage and attempting to form a union.³¹ A worker at TOP Line Global Co., Ltd. stated that there is no union in the workplace to which to complain about abuses. He further explained to *MLN*, "This is the third attempt [at forming a union]. For this reason, people were fired, mainly the ones who took the lead. When we protested, the factory cut off water supplies for

workers for three to four days. If we raised any complaints, we were asked to sign warnings and sometimes were dismissed."³²

To interfere with worker-organized unions and window dress their crackdowns thereon, employers and factory officials create "yellow trade unions," which they control to undermine workers' genuine and legitimate representation. In some cases, yellow unions involve staff with management-level positions, including supervisors, meaning that the workers are effectively unable to submit complaints or report violations, as the union is positioned to protect the factory rather than represent workers' interests. In this vein, the CTUM "has also reported that the [junta] has illegally appropriated the flags of CTUM and other independent unions, including [the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFM)], to promote yellow unions. Companies use these "unions" under their control to fake compliance with International Labour Organization (ILO) standards and Myanmar labor law for external audits and public reports—pretending to protect workers' rights. A union leader told *MLN*, The employer wants only the trade union that follow their orders. For us, we don't turn a blind eye on the worker's damages.

In an interview with *MLN*, Myo Myo Aye said, "There is a specific structure for establishing a [Workplace Coordination Committee (WCC)], but factories are forming WCCs on their own terms. Despite our repeated reports of this misconduct to the [junta's] labor ministry, the ministry continues to neglect it."³⁹ She further stated, "Although we proposed to participate in township-level meetings on workers' affairs, our request was rejected. Only those without genuine representation of workers are allowed to take part...There is no true representation of us (workers) at the WCC of factories."⁴⁰

<u>Unlawful terminations</u>: Workers are experiencing increased vulnerability and hardship due to a rise in unlawful terminations. Workers from SAFETY CLOTHING (Myanmar) Co., Ltd. in Yangon reported that many have been unlawfully terminated, including being dismissed without valid reasons, prior notice, or severance pay. ⁴¹ In many dismissal cases, workers are informed that they must leave the very next day. Among many other companies, Wan Xin Myanmar Co., Ltd. in Yangon has unlawfully terminated pregnant employees instead of providing maternity leave and social welfare benefits. ⁴² At Rainbow Tec Myanmar garment factory in Yangon, employees hired under probationary contracts have been denied social benefits and job security, with many working for over a year without being made permanent, thus continuing as daily wage workers. ⁴³

Inadequate facilities and breaktime: Unsafe and poor working environments and facilities are depriving workers of their fundamental rights to health and safety. Workers are forced to work in overcrowded and deplorable conditions, including unclean and insufficient toilets, inadequate drinking water, and poor ventilation, such as the absence of fans during the summer. ⁴⁴ A worker at the KSHENG Myanmar garment factory reported that they are compelled to work excessive overtime with only 30 minutes for lunch. ⁴⁵ Similarly, workers from the New Fubon garment factory reported that they are forced to work without bathroom breaks to meet the high production target, leaving them physically and mentally exhausted. ⁴⁶ At the Sunrise Myanmar Fashion garment factory, workers said their health is deteriorating due to excessive working hours. A worker stated, "Our health is suffering. Some workers are so exhausted they act like they're possessed by spirits.... [Managers] slap those who appear possessed and drag them out of the factory. They also threatened to fire anyone else who gets possessed."⁴⁷

<u>Restrictions on leave and exploitation of overtime</u>: Despite Myanmar law entitling workers to six days of paid casual leave per year, as well as public holidays and 10 days of earned leave per year, ⁴⁸ in practice, workers are not permitted to take leave, including sick leave and medical leave, and they face severe financial penalties when absent. ⁴⁹ For example, at Wan Xin Myanmar Co., Ltd., when a worker is absent for one day, the employer deducts MMK 50,000 from their total salary, forcing them

to work at a deficit for multiple days.⁵⁰ Unlawful termination is also a common consequence of taking leave. A worker at JOYFUL (Myanmar) garment factory said, "Social security leave or sick leave is not allowed, and neither is casual leave. No legal entitlements are given. They don't approve leave if we can't work due to poor health or personal emergencies and call to request leave. Instead, they simply say we missed work for three days and unlawfully terminate us."⁵¹

In addition, workers are often required to work overtime without provision of transportation to/from the factories, which are located in Hlaing Thar Yar Township on the outskirts of Yangon City, exacerbating financial, safety, and security concerns for workers.⁵² Returning home late at night, workers face heightened risks of becoming victims of crime, including robbery. In February 2023, workers at Tianjin Fashion Milestone garment factory were "robbed on the way home due to lack of ferries to transport workers home at night."⁵³

Khaing Zar Aung, president of IWFM, told *MLN* that factories in Myanmar "are forcing their workers not to be absent by threatening them [with removal] from their current positions." ⁵⁴

Workers are forced to work under exploitative conditions, with no safeguards for their health, dignity, or safety. Employers do not provide any support and fail to assume liability if an employee is injured in the workplace, even though the employer's liability is articulated in the employees' contracts. 55 For example, in 2023 at the GTIG Guohua Glory Co., Ltd. garment factory in Yangon, a worker fell from a factory vehicle and sustained a head injury. 56 Although the worker was granted leave and partial compensation, the factory refused to assume the liability to provide medical treatment.

Infringement on personal devices, communications, and identification documents (IDs): Employers are restricting workers' communication and confiscating their personal devices, limiting their ability to report abuse or seek help while at work. A worker from Myanmar Journey Bags factory reported that their phones were confiscated and that phone usage during breaks is also restricted. The worker also told *MLN*, "The manager said they wouldn't return our phones until we stop reporting the overtime issue." 57

Physical and sexual assault: Workers, especially women, face physical and sexual assault in the workplace, with reports of managers physically attacking and abusing employees. Workers from HOPE ONE garment factory in Yangon said, "The workers from a factory with more than 1,000 workers have to line up for going back home and the manager physically assaulting the workers who don't line up (slapping the girls and knocking the head to boys)." At Set Kyar Min Pharmaceuticals in Yangon, which employs over 40 women, a female manager undressed female employees' skirts in view of CCTV cameras to identify who had disposed of a used pad in a trash bin. "The factory does not provide any trash bins in the bathrooms. When the women have issues (menstruation) like this, they have to pack them (pads) in bags and take it home," said a person who has close ties with the workers. ⁵⁹

<u>Child labor</u>: Since the coup attempt, child labor at factories has increased dramatically—particularly over the last two years as the junta's forced conscription has created labor shortages for factories, with young adults fleeing for safety or being forcibly recruited by the junta. In July 2025, child labor practices and violations are occurring in 11 factories in Myanmar.⁶⁰ In particular, child workers are paid less than adults despite performing the same workload and are deprived of many other benefits and rights. Workers at the Xing Run Myanmar garment factory in Yangon reported that child workers make up over 10 percent of the factory's workforce.⁶¹ These children are paid on a daily basis and are required to work overtime like other employees. However, they receive less than half of the adult rate of MMK 7,800 (approximately USD 3.72) per day.⁶² Fuu Baii Houng Industrial Co., Ltd. in Yangon also reportedly has child workers as young as 12 years old.⁶³

V. Socio-economic consequences of rights violations in Myanmar

The socio-economic consequences of labor rights violations in Myanmar are far reaching. Women—as the vast majority of Myanmar's 1 million garment workers across Yangon, Bago, and Ayeyarwaddy Regions—bear the brunt of the exploitation and abuse described above. Each worker typically supports multiple dependents, which means that in Yangon alone, millions of dependents are affected by the horrific abuses faced by their household's breadwinner. As wages have stagnated while inflation skyrockets and the junta's violence continues across the country, many families are forced to pull their children out of school to work and contribute to household survival. In tandem, rising unemployment and insecurity push workers to source income in other ways, including sex work. Furthermore, these harsh, junta-caused conditions force many workers to flee to other countries, including China, Taos, and Thailand, where many are subjected to further exploitation and human rights abuses, including human trafficking.

VI. Deportation and forced conscription of Myanmar migrant workers

Myanmar workers in Malaysia and Thailand are being arrested and deported to Myanmar. In August 2025 alone, Malaysia government deported around 150 Myanmar nationals to Myanmar, many of whom had been arrested for overstaying their visas, lacking legal documents, and/or entering the country illegally.⁶⁹ Over a three-week period in 2024, more than 144,000 Myanmar nationals were deported from Thailand "in a crackdown aimed at weeding out 'job seekers.'"⁷⁰ According to numerous media and ground reports, the junta has systematically targeted deportees to Myanmar for forced conscription.⁷¹ Upon forced return to Myanmar, the deportees are put in the custody of the junta, who then detains individuals aged 18–35,⁷² transfers them to infantry battalion bases or other military training centers,⁷³ and forcibly conscripts them into military service.⁷⁴

VII. Conclusion

Myanmar's 1 million garment workers across Yangon, Bago, and Ayeyarwaddy Regions are a key pillar of Myanmar's economy, specifically exports for global brands. These workers—who are predominantly women—are trapped in a cycle of exploitation, poverty, and fear perpetuated by the military junta. While workers in Myanmar, in general, struggle to survive with little to no protection of their rights, they are further haunted by the junta's forced conscription and threats to compel them to participate in its sham election. The exploitation of Myanmar's industrial workers directly implicates the multinational supply chains of international corporations and the governments which regulate those entities. Unless and until the Myanmar military junta's terror campaign ends, Myanmar workers will continue to suffer economic exploitation and rights violations.

VIII. Recommendations

The international community has both a moral responsibility and a strategic interest in protecting Myanmar's labor force, not only to uphold human rights but also to ensure global supply chain integrity and transparency. Corporations and investors must integrate these realities into their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments, with full recognition that responsible sourcing and corporate due diligence are essential to preventing complicity in the junta's human rights violations and atrocity crimes. Immediate, coordinated action is required to safeguard Myanmar's workers, end the junta's terror campaign against the people, and prevent further deterioration of labor rights in Myanmar. The international community is, therefore, urged to:

a. Impose and enforce targeted sanctions on junta-linked businesses, corporations, and individuals, including those profiting from labor exploitation and abuse.

- b. Pressure international corporations to ensure supply chain due diligence with an emphasis on ensuring labor rights conditions.
- c. Provide financial and technical support to exiled and underground labor unions and independent, locally led civil society organizations.
- d. Provide emergency humanitarian aid and livelihood support to displaced workers and their families through locally led border-based channels.
- e. Provide financial and technical support for safe spaces, legal assistance, and protection programs for Myanmar workers, especially women facing sexual harassment and exploitation.
- f. Raise labor rights violations through all available platforms, e.g., the ILO, the UN Human Rights Council, the Group of Seven (G7).
- g. Respect and fulfill the international obligation of *non-refoulement*, and halt all arbitrary detention, pushbacks, deportations, and other forced returns of Myanmar people—particularly given the junta's systematic forced conscription of migrant workers deported to Myanmar.
- h. Ensure legal protection, including work permits, and access to essential services for Myanmar workers and their families in countries to which they have fled from the junta's violence.

 $^{^1}$ "အင်းစိန်ထောင်တွင်း အချုပ်သားများကို ကြိုတင်မဲပေးရန် ဖိအားပေး ခြိမ်းခြောက်," Democratic Voice of Burma, 15 october 2025, https://www.dvb.no/post/728855.

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⁶⁰ Myanmar Labour Society Research Team, "Survey: ကလေးလုပ်သားများအပေါ် လုပ်အားခေါင်းပုံဖြတ်မှု (သို့) ဇူလိုင်လ အလုပ်သမားသတင်းအစီရင်ခံစာ," *Myanmar Labour News*, July 2025,

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⁵¹ Ma Ma (Kyaw Kyaw Win, Translator), "Leave Requests Being Rejected Workers terminated Unlawfully," *Myanmar Labour News*, 11 January 2025, https://www.myanmarlabournews.com/en/posts/leave-requests-being-rejected-workers-terminated-unlawfully.

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Chinese Yuan for the costs associated with bringing her to China, which was 2,000 Chinese Yuan greater than the market rate of the costs. At the factory, she was forced to work from 7:40 am to 9:10 pm. For breaktime, she was given only 40 minutes for lunch and 30 minutes for dinner. She was sometimes asked to work until midnight without overtime pay. As a result of sleep deprivation from overtime work, she often got sick. In the factory, there are insufficient bathrooms and water supply for the number of workers. The factory also employs children. If workers choose to resign, the factory deducts one-month salary as a penalty. The worker also told *MLN* that whenever there is audit or investigation, workers are asked to lie about their monthly salary, overtime pay rates, and other information. The employer told them to tell auditors that their IDs are not being kept by the employer (though they are), dismissal is at 5:30 pm (though they are dismissed much later), free lunch is provided (though it is not), and that there is a union leader (though there is no union at all). Min Ni Kyaw, "ပွဲစားခမ္ လွတ်မြောက်ခွင့်အထိ (သို့) Yunnan Xiao Bu Garment စက်ရုံမှ လစာခေါင်းပုံဖြတ်မှု," *Myanmar Labour News*, 15 November 2025, <a href="https://www.myanmarlabournews.com/posts/បွဲစားခမ္-လွတ်မြောက်ခွင့်အထိ-သို့-yunnan-xiao-bu-garment-စက်ရုံမှ-လစာခေါင်းပုံဖြတ်မှု."

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