

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

Phyo Sandar Soe ([00:01](#)):

With your money they will keep controlling the country, and that they will buy guns and weapons, and then they will kill us.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([00:21](#)):

Hello, sisters and brothers. Welcome to the Solidarity Center podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also Executive Director of the Solidarity Center in Washington D.C. We're the largest US-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, and for greater equality in the global economy, and for one just future.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([01:05](#)):

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup, overturning the democratically elected government and installing a military junta, an authoritarian form of government that is, in practice, a military dictatorship. Since the coup, nearly 1,000 people have been killed and at least 5,000 arrested, most tortured in prison. The Myanmar people have responded with massive protests against the junta, and from the beginning, workers, especially women workers and their unions, have led the way.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([01:43](#)):

My guest today is Phyo Sandar Soe, a union leader and the Assistant General Secretary of the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar. She has been on the front lines of the Civil Disobedience Movement that is protesting the military junta. The conversation you're about to hear takes place while sister Sandar lives in a safe house. Her own government has revoked her passport, along with dozens of other union leaders, to prevent any of them from leaving the country while they are being hunted by the regime. In fact, banning unions was one of the first actions the military junta took, because when workers join together, they are such a powerful force that they could stand up even to a dictatorship.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([02:30](#)):

Sandar is also a former garment worker, which informs her work as an organizer with the Federation of Garment Workers Myanmar. As the multinational fashion labels that manufacture their garment in Myanmar begin to reopen, she offers us a unique perspective on how the international community can truly help the workers that are fighting for their rights, things as basic as getting paid for their work.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([02:56](#)):

One quick note for listeners. During our conversation, you'll hear us refer to both Myanmar and Burma. The political history on how the international community has referred to this country is rich and controversial, and worth reading about.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([03:10](#)):

We are so grateful and thrilled that sister Sandar could join us and share with us the bravery of Myanmar workers as they use their voice and their power to stand up for democracy in the face of

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

state-sponsored brutality. Can you please introduce yourself and give us your title and your role in the trade union movement.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([03:41](#)):

Yes. My name is Phyo Sandar Soe. I am Assistant General Secretary of Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar, CTUM. My union, Confederation of Trade Unions, CTUM, is the first one which is the most representative trade union organization in Myanmar. Currently, yes, I am participating in the Spring Revolution which is to fight back against the military junta.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([04:18](#)):

Sandar, as we get started here I really just wanted to check in with you. How are you doing? It's been a really intense couple of months. How are you? How's your family?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([04:29](#)):

Personally, yes, of course, we have been receiving a lot of pressure from the military junta. Right now, they have been changing so many articles according to our penal code. We are hiding so that we cannot be arrested by this brutal military army. Yes, of course, we have stress. Sometimes we feel depressed because people we ... trade unionists, we are doing our democracy fight peacefully but at the same time, the military junta, they are cracking down the innocent people and trade unionists very brutally. Of course, we feel depressed because we want to do something which is very effective for this Spring Revolution. We really angry with this military junta, very brutal. They are very brutal. They are killing innocent people and they are killing trade unionists, and they are torturing trade unionists and people. That's why, personally, that I feel angry. Sometimes I feel stressful, and sometimes I feel depressed.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([06:13](#)):

I can imagine, and yet I've seen your incredible activism through this incredibly tough time. I can only imagine what that's like. I wonder, you mentioned that you and many of the labor leaders of Burma are, in fact, in hiding. Can you share a little bit about what is that experience like?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([06:36](#)):

Like we are living in prison, because we are hiding in so-called safe houses, but it is not safe. At the same time, we have been participating in the daily actions, which is to fight back against the military junta. We cannot stay in safe houses only because we are in the middle of the revolution, so we have to fight. There's so many solutions to fight back at the military junta to achieve our democracy movement, our democracy fight. That is why, even though we are in dangerous zones, but we are struggling. We have been struggling for our fight.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([07:32](#)):

Sometimes I feel proud of myself and of my organization, of the revolution, because even though we have a brutal crackdown by the army, like us, people we don't really afraid. We are not really afraid at all. All the time we are finding the solutions to end this game, to achieve this fight. Sometimes we feel confident. We are protected by the people, by the community, but sometimes, due to the risk what we are doing, we feel unsafe.

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

Shawna Bader-Blau ([08:22](#)):

It's an intense situation on the ground since the military took over in February. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the role of unions, unions and worker organizations, since the military coup? What role have unions been playing?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([08:41](#)):

Yes, that is a very good question. Trade unions, normally our age is working population. Working-age people is from, in Myanmar, from 16 years old to the 60 years old. We are between these ages, trade union is. That is why you will see that since the military coup, trade unions and Generation Z. Generation Z is very young age people. We are leading the revolution. For trade unions, we are parents of Generation Z at the same time, like double. We are participating in this movement like parents, and then like ourselves for the revolution.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([09:37](#)):

For CTUM, for trade unionists since the military coup, for CTUM, we were part of the tripartite mechanism inside the country. Since the military coup, we announce our position and then we inform to the military junta, you are not democratic government, you are the military junta, and you took the country. You control the country unfairly, unjustly, and then by using weapons and guns. That is why we don't recognize you as our government. So we stopped working together with the military junta. We officially informed them. That is our role in the Spring Revolution. We started as long as the military coup. We officially informed them, the military junta, we cannot work with you. We are not our government. You are not our government, you are not representing us at all. That's why we stopped working together with you. We resign from the tripartite mechanism inside the country.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([10:55](#)):

That was a really incredible moment, when the labor movement of Myanmar saw the coup and told the new regime, "You are not legitimate and we will not participate in these talks with you." For our listeners, tripartite means government, employers, and workers. The workers said the government here is not legitimate, we're pulling out. You used weapons, we're using peaceful resistance. That was a really powerful moment. I bet it sent a huge message to the military and to the people of Burma.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([11:32](#)):

We can say that CTUM who announce stopping together, working together with the military regime. Our members, and then other trade unions, they really supported. Then people also supported. And CTUM, we have public sector workers unions, so by looking at our statement, position statement, they also have got motivation, and they try Civil Disobedience Movement, which is very important to fight back the military junta. So Myanmar trade unions, by looking at our stand, our position statement, they got motivation, and they stand up with us, and they started Civil Disobedience Movement. Like that, we got a lot of good reaction from people.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([12:29](#)):

And later, on the 6th of February, CTUM, we tried mass demonstration.

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

Shawna Bader-Blau ([12:37](#)):

So the labor movement, right from the beginning, was not only objecting to the junta but was also mobilizing members and workers to come out and protest as part of the new democracy movement, the CDM. Can you tell us a little bit more about the CDM? Who is participating? What is that movement about?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([12:58](#)):

Yes. Mostly in the beginning we understood that Civil Disobedience Movement is responsible for the government sector, civil public sectors in the beginning. All public sector workers, especially Myanmar trade sectors, oil and gas sector, and education sectors, these main sectors, they started Civil Disobedience Movement. They stopped working at the military regime. We can say that 95 percent of public-sector workers from these sectors, they stopped working together, working under the military junta.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([13:48](#)):

Wow, 95 percent, that's incredible.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([13:49](#)):

Yeah, 95 percent. That is why the military junta, they cannot implement, they cannot operate their activities. In the beginning, we got awareness. This Civil Disobedience Movement is related to the public-sector workers. Some time later we understood that private-sector workers also should be joining. That is why discussed with the factory owners, employers, we will also participate in the movement so you'd better give leaves for us, for the workers. Some employers who are supporting the Spring Revolution, they pay leaves for workers, but some employers who are supporting the military junta, they give pressure against the workers who join the Civil Disobedience Movement. They give current address of workers, trade unionists to the military junta. We are facing, at the same time, the employers who are supporting the Spring Revolution and the employers who are supporting the military junta.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([15:08](#)):

Wow, I want to ask a lot of questions about that, about the role of employers. Before we get there, though, take us back to those first rallies. That first month, we saw pictures on the internet, on TV, of just hundreds of thousands of people, and you're talking about how trade unions were right at the center of that on the street. What was it like? What were those rallies like? What did it feel like to be on the street, protesting against the junta with all of the citizens of your country?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([15:46](#)):

Chief of Army, Min Hlaing, in his interview, he admitted that he did not expect like that, people across the whole country will do this kind of demonstration to show our desire, our willingness. We reject the coup. Everybody on the streets, in the streets, on the roads, we want to show our desire, which is we reject the coup. We will overthrow the military junta. Everybody who wants to show our desire, in 1988, they also took coup by using guns and weapons, but this time it's 21st century, in 2021. This time you

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

will not succeed at all. This military coup will not succeed at all. People and trade unions and the workers, we show our desire to the military junta.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([16:56](#)):

Every day we want to do demonstration, every day. If we do not do only for one day, we feel that we are not dutiful for the country.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([17:10](#)):

It's an incredible, powerful image you're talking about, the drive of people to have their own country be the democracy that they want, and they're not going to accept another coup. You went through it in 1988, don't want to face it again. I can imagine that energy on the street was intense, and the pictures on television really were moving. What were people saying in the streets? Were there certain signs people had or common chants people had? What was the movement on the ground? What were people saying? What was motivating people?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([17:48](#)):

Motivation is we have Generation Z, Generation Y, and Generation X. Generation Y and Generation X, we have already experienced with a military coup, and under the military regime our life's very bad. We could not connect with the international people. There we could not learn very well, and then we were very poor. Our living standards was under poverty line for many years. Then the country was announced to be a least developed country. Generation Z, the youngest Generation Z, they have experienced democratic practice for 10 years under the democratic government, so they know the value of democratic, the practice community, and that the country for starting situation, the country developed. The country was developed. Not like in our generation. That's why trade unions and workers, like parents, we cannot happen this for our generation alpha. This is our motivation.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([19:13](#)):

So young people have experienced democracy and don't want to give it up. They've been living in the possibility of the future, and here comes the military junta so they're fighting against that. Their parents are fighting out of love and pride for the country that they can build and for their children.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([19:35](#)):

Yes.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([19:35](#)):

Sounds like an intergenerational commitment to democracy in Burma.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([19:41](#)):

Yes, yes. Like that, like that, yeah. We don't want to give dark ages for our Generation Alpha. That's why we must win, we must win. We got this motivation.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([19:53](#)):

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

The description you were giving earlier about strikes, I imagine ... We know there's a significant garment sector in Burma and that many of the people who work in that sector are young and women. We know that they were protesting and went on strike. Can you tell us a little bit about that movement of young workers?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([20:16](#)):

Yes. Garment factory workers, they started demonstration first. Everybody, the student unions and that other activists also, are proud to say that. The movement in Yangon is started by the young garment factory workers, especially women. They started in the morning time. Then later, afternoon and evening time, like CTUM and other trade unions, we try together. Then the crowd is bigger and bigger. It's really proud to say that garment factory workers started demonstration in Yangon.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([20:58](#)):

Another thing is after they join the demonstration, they got serious pressure from the employers and the military junta, houses of the leaders raided by the military junta. That's why they are hiding as well. Workers, they cannot go back to the factories because, like I said earlier, employers, they gave current address of the workers, strikers, to the military junta so they cannot go back to the factories. They lost their jobs, but they don't give up. For two months they join, these factory workers. They keep joining in the movement, but after the serious brutal crackdown, bloody crackdown by the military army, they cannot stay at their home. Right now, garment factory workers who joined the Spring Revolution, they lost their jobs and now they are hiding as well.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([22:08](#)):

You mentioned earlier that in the beginning of the movement, some employers were giving some workers leave to participate in the democracy movement, but you also just said that other employers are giving names and addresses to the junta.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([22:24](#)):

Yes.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([22:25](#)):

Can you tell us a little bit about what the crackdown on workers and labor leaders has been? What have been the consequences for all of you for your brave activism?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([22:38](#)):

Yeah, workers in Myanmar, before these things, before the coup, our minimum wage was very low. That is why we not have savings. We do not have savings at all. We are depending for our daily survival on our wages. When we lost our jobs, of course we don't have earnings for our families at all. In that case, we are not getting support from the National Unity Government as well. That is why we are depending on the donation from the local community. Local community also this time is very ... we are facing economy recession already. Local community also, they cannot support much to the workers, trade union leaders. In that case, workers, they are living in rented houses so they cannot pay, and then they cannot buy food for their survival. You will that in many videos on YouTube, especially in industrial zone

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

areas. Workers, they are taking the liquid from boiling rice. They cannot eat nutritious food because their living is very low. They don't have saving or any money. That is why, even for the food.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([24:17](#)):

At the same time, we all are feeling the pressure from the military junta so we all are running away and hiding to the safe zones, the safe houses. A lot of challenges for us.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([24:32](#)):

Back to your story about the industrial zones and how workers who used to be working in factories making clothes for export are now having to live because they spoke up for freedom and democracy. I'm wondering, they were making clothes for export, right? What kind of companies were sourcing in these factories, and where were they exporting to?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([25:03](#)):

We are also working with international brands. We have a lot of famous popular brands working in Myanmar. Suppliers are China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, so a lot of our suppliers. We are exporting to the yes, of course European countries, U.S., and other developed countries. I would like to add to one more thing. Due to the crackdown, brutal crackdown of the military regime, trade union leaders, labor activists are running away and hiding. That's why we cannot help for the workers. Right now, they have been facing a lot of workers' rights violation. In that case, they don't have labor activists or trade union leaders who can support, who can help for their dispute.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([26:02](#)):

Very easily right now, employers and the military junta officials ... I don't want to say them--they are not our government. I don't want to mention about the other government, just military terrorists. They are right now exploiting our workers' rights. Workers, they don't get leaves and holidays. They don't get regular payment. They don't get compensation even for the temporary shut down. Before the coup, we claim back, we claimed back for our workers' rights, at least in the dispute mechanism. Trade union leaders and activists, we can support, we can help the victims, the workers who have been violated, but right now, for ourselves, we are running, we are hiding. We cannot help for that.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([27:05](#)):

Our conversation with Sandar continues after the break, but first, if you want to support the brave women and men standing up for freedom in Myanmar, you can donate to a fund set up by the U.S.-based Asian Pacific Labor Alliance. Your donation will go to those who have lost jobs and are struggling to survive because they stood up for a peaceful return to democracy. The link is available in the podcast notes for this episode, and at solidaritycenter.org/podcast.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([27:41](#)):

Hi there, it's Shawna again. I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out RadioLabour, the international labor movement's radio service. RadioLabour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues, and it also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out RadioLabour at radiolabour.net to find out more about workers' rights struggles around the world

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment, and strong communities. Follow and subscribe at radiolabour.net.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([28:31](#)):

Before we return to our interview, I want to share another way you can support Myanmar workers. The International Trade Union Confederation is sponsoring a strike fund for workers in Myanmar. The link is available in the podcast notes for this episode and at solidarycenter.org/podcast.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([28:50](#)):

As we spoke with Sandar, we lost the connection before she was able to find another way to join us. The junta regularly cuts off electricity across the country to block people from connecting to the international community and to each other.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([29:09](#)):

Well, this is one of the really remarkable stories of the 10 years of democratic opening in Burma, isn't it, that leaders like you in the labor movement of Burma worked at the grassroots with garment workers, agricultural workers, public and private sector, to build trade unions and to build worker rights into the fabric and daily life of workers, so that if they had disputes they had mechanisms and ways to deal with these disputes with the employers. If they couldn't get it fixed through talking, they could strike, a collective strike action, to get something done. The workers of Burma have been really militant, also, over the last 10 years and developed this incredible organization.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([29:57](#)):

As you were describing the image of, in this case, industrial workers, living in industrial zones back in poverty, having lost the gains of the last 10 years, they also have lost their unions.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([30:12](#)):

Yes.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([30:13](#)):

And the day-to-day settlement. Sandar, as somebody who has dedicated your last many years to building these unions, establishing this role for the labor movement in the country, I wonder what you're doing these days to keep in touch with other union activists. Are you able to stay in communication?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([30:41](#)):

Sometimes. Good things and bad things. The good thing is that due to the military junta, right now, trade unions, we got, we achieved more unity among us. But due to our common enemy, right now we are very closely working together under the Labor Alliance. Every Saturday we have Labor Alliance meeting. We discuss about the current challenges for workers and for the country, for our revolution. At the same time, we are part of the general strike coordination party at the country level. Five representatives from the Labor Alliance are getting involved in this body. Day to day that we are discussing, we are closely working together for our country.

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

Shawna Bader-Blau ([31:41](#)):

That Labor Alliance, I know that together the trade unions of Burma are making demands, calling for specific actions from global corporations and also from governments around the world. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What are the current demands of the movement for democracy in Burma and the trade unions in particular?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([32:06](#)):

Yes. Sister, thank you so much for this question. Right now, trade unions, we are working for our revolution in two ways. One is yes, we have to maintain our Civil Disobedience Movement, not only for the public sector but also for the private sector. International people will see that even though we have bloody crackdown by the regime, our demonstration, every day you will see that demonstration is keeping. Every day we are demonstrating maybe that the method will be changed. Right now, due to the bloody crackdown, we changed our flash mob style, but at least you will see that we have to maintain our momentum for the peaceful demonstration. For this peaceful demonstration, a lot of challenges we have been facing, especially for the workers.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([33:04](#)):

I have already mentioned all the other trade unions and workers. We don't have any saving monies due to the low daily income, same before the coup. for the food. We need humanitarian assistance from you because we are workers, we are basic class people. We don't have any income, money even to buy food. We are facing serious challenges, so of course, we need humanitarian assistance. That is for the private sector.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([33:38](#)):

Another one is for the public-sector workers. Our government workers, the public-sector workers, they are also joining in Civil Disobedience Movement to keep this fight. Of course, they need salary support from our brothers and our sisters. That is for the inside internal movement. For the outside, for the international pressure, for example they have already kicked out the military junta from the sit-in. That's very great news for us, and the International Labor Organization, during the 109th session, they have already kick out the military junta. Then, food and agriculture organizations, they have already kick out. United Nations Security Council right now kick out the military junta.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([34:35](#)):

We would like to call for the international brothers and sisters to keep international pressure for us. For us, for people in Myanmar. Right now, very soon, the United Nations General Assembly Council will be convened, so in this General Assembly, please stand with us. Then, please help the Myanmar people to kick out the military junta at the UN as well. We need this kind of pressure.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([35:07](#)):

Another pressure is sister, we need comprehensive sanctions against the military junta. In the beginning, only Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar, CTUM, we proposed comprehensive sanctions meaning which has been for each and every sector. We accepted that. Under the military junta we cannot implement our worker's rights at all. Every day, day by day, our workers' rights are being violated by the

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

employers and the military junta so we cannot work. We cannot work in good conditions under the military system. For government sector as well.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([35:54](#)):

We will post the list of demands of the labor movement of Burma on behalf of the democracy movement in Burma in our podcast notes so that everyone can see them and can link. I will tell listeners there are calls to raise money for humanitarian assistance, food and clothing support for the people of Burma who have lost their jobs and are still fighting, many of whom are in hiding. We will link to those fundraisers. You talked about the increasing isolation of the military junta at the level of the United Nations. You talked about the UN General Assembly, and hopefully they'll be isolated there. You talked about the Security Council. You talked about the International Labor Organization and how the junta was rejected by the International Labor Conference as well so there's a growing isolation.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([36:48](#)):

You hear sometimes, and maybe we hear from the White House or you hear from the European Union, that sanctions are going to just hurt the people of Burma, that the people of Burma are in need of jobs, they're in need of income, and if we have sanctions, it's going to lead to more poverty. You hear a lot of governments saying that they don't support comprehensive sanctions, but I heard you say workers are calling for comprehensive sanctions. What would you say to these other governments across Asia, the United States, and Europe that are worried about the impact of sanctions on the people of Burma?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([37:32](#)):

According to my own experiences there, in 2003, I was a garment factory worker as well. In 2003, we were under the military junta like this. My factory was exporting to the United States, and the United States imposed sanctions against my factory. That factory shut down due to sanctions. I was a victim of this economy sanction so I can say that yeah, of course, we had a difficult time because I lost my job due to the sanction, economy sanction. But this time I understood that if we don't have any option to end this fight, to overthrow the military regime for our beloved country, Myanmar, we have to take a bitter medicine. Our workers, we cannot work with good working conditions. Every day, day by day, they are violating ... employers and the junta ... violating workers' rights. Right now, workers are not even though they work for a month, for two months, whether they would get their payment, their salary. Because if by European Union, United States, other Asia countries, if you invest in Myanmar, your investment money will go to the military regime. Then the military regime, with your money, they will keep controlling the country and that they will buy guns and weapons and then they will kill us.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([39:28](#)):

That's why, from here, I would like to call for please don't invest in Myanmar. This is 21st century, and then we all are implementing democratic principles, democratic practice. If you let the military junta control the country like that, it would spread to the Asian countries. It will spread through the Asia country. It will spread to the developing countries. We cannot let this military junta to do that again. So please stop investing money in Myanmar.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([40:12](#)):

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

A powerful call from workers themselves who are currently not only suffering the wrath of an unjust military that is killing people and threatening people and imprisoning people but are also suffering job loss and lack of income. A powerful call you just made as workers for sanctions. I heard you say, Sandar, that we are workers, we have worker rights, we care about working standards and living conditions for workers. We cannot good jobs in a military junta. We cannot have democratic worker rights in a military junta, so we need to end the junta. We need to end the military regime, and you're calling for sanctions.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([41:04](#)):

I wonder if, when you think about the future and the call for sanctions, you mentioned it feels like you've got to take bitter medicine. It's like a bitter medicine.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([41:18](#)):

Yes.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([41:19](#)):

When you think about the next several months, or however long it takes, I wonder how you prepare for that?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([41:29](#)):

Sister, you know even in industry, today I got a news, 200 factories will be shut down. You will see that every day, that the military, they cannot run the country because they are not legitimate government. That is why people, we don't accept or we don't listen to the military junta at all. Government functions, the country functions, are collapsed already. Every day bomb explosions we are hearing even though we want to go to work, but our working places are not safe. They cannot secure our people at all. Even though international people are calling them security forces but they cannot secure our people at all.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([42:17](#)):

Even though you want to invest in Myanmar, your investment will not be successful, and your investment will be not benefiting to our workers and people. UNICEF already had a statement, 20 millions people of Myanmar already under poverty line, so we will suffer more. Right now, the good thing is the military people, they are also weakening due to the international pressure, economy sanctions targeted against the military people. They don't have money. They are weakening at the same time.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([42:59](#)):

Military-backed party, right now they are blaming the military junta. You take the coup but you cannot run the country as a successful country. They are blaming each other already. I believe that if we take bitter medicine, we will win this fight in a short time period.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([43:26](#)):

Motivated by the hope and building towards something better in the future. I imagine when you're meeting in the Labor Alliance and you're talking with your brothers and sisters in the labor movement, that in addition to talking about the tactics of survival and fight now, you're also imagining a future.

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

What would it look like? What would it look like to have the government that you elected come back? What would that mean for workers? That vision that you're driving towards that motivates you to keep fighting, what does it look like to have a democracy restored in Burma, and what does it mean for workers?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([44:08](#)):

Even though we have a lot of challenges, we have to endure this kind of situation because we all know that this time, the best motivation is day by day, getting higher and higher. We don't want to see more deaths, so that is why don't go. We don't organize a very big crowd demonstration. Every day we are doing peaceful demonstration across the country. You will see from the media, international media. We are showing our motivation. At this time, our motivation not decreased, not reduced at all. People, we all know that we must end this game, we must end this fight successfully.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([44:58](#)):

When I hear you say that, I think about how powerful that is for us to hear in the global community, that if the people of Burma and the movement of Burma for democracy is not giving up and is willing to endure hardship to win, that we should not give up either. The global community needs to stand by you in your demands.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([45:19](#)):

Sandar, you're a really important leader in Burma. You're well known. You have been part of the leadership building the democratic labor movement of Burma. What is it in your upbringing or in your background that inspired you to get involved in the labor movement? Where does that come from in your life? What inspired you?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([45:42](#)):

I moved to Thailand. I moved to Thailand to get a better job in 2006. I worked in a garment factory as a migrant worker. Then later, sister, without documents I moved to Thailand and I worked in a garment factory. The police, Thai police, arrested me for illegal migration. Then I was in prison for two times for illegal migration. When I was in prison, Thai prisons, I saw a lot of Burmese migrant workers like me. I started thinking, my country is very rich in natural resources. We have very good work force, but why I am poor? Why my country is poor? Then, why the country is living under poverty line?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([46:46](#)):

I started thinking, Thai situation, living standard is higher than us. The salary is higher than us, so I started to thinking okay, I need to do something for my country by seeing these Burmese migrant workers who are in prison with me. Then later, I joined the movement. Okay, I need to do something for my country. I will do something because I was young. At that time I was young. For this fight, my explanation is after I joined the underground movement in 2006, our country was changed, democratization in 2010. The government, the previous government, they allow freedom of association. Then, I came back with my organization in 2003. I had a lot of expectation for labor sector. I would try my best. We would try our best to achieve good working conditions for our brothers and sisters, for my country, and that we would try our best for democratization.

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

Phyo Sandar Soe ([48:01](#)):

But when the coup, this time on the 1st of February, I was really angry then. I did not get married, sister, because I want to spend my life for the-

Shawna Bader-Blau ([48:20](#)):

Can you hear us, Sandar? I think we lost her.

Speaker 3 ([48:25](#)):

I think we have, yes. Oh, here we go, here we go.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([48:31](#)):

Hi.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([48:33](#)):

Sorry, sister. Yeah, the electricity cut off.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([48:37](#)):

Well, I'm glad to see you, and we won't keep you. I know it's late. This has been a really, really fantastic interview. You were just starting to say that you never got married because you wanted to be dedicated to this work. I wanted to see if you wanted to finish that thought.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([48:55](#)):

Yes, yes. I had a very high expectation for the labor sector, for my country. The labor should be developed. Our workers' rights should be in line with international labor standards. That's my expectation, my ambition for my country. That's why for 10 years after I came back from Thailand, from exile movement. I spend my life for the movement, my life. I sleep at the office, I work at the office. I don't go back to my family. Very rare I just go back to my family to meet with my parents, very rare, because I want to develop labor sector for the country.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([49:49](#)):

But like this, I invested my life, my younger time in my lifetime, but this military coup, we try to be good social partners in the tripartite mechanism, together with International Labour Organization, ILO, and our international brothers and sisters from Solidarity Center, AFL-CIO. Personally, I had very high expectation for my country, but this stupid military junta, they destroy everything what we build up for over 10 years. I really get angry, but at the same time, this is my explanation, my motivation to seriously, actively participate in this Spring Revolution.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([50:54](#)):

These regimes can take away so much, so many institutions, hurt so many people in prison, but when I was hearing you say, I can feel it that they haven't taken away you. They haven't taken the movement, the heart of the people for a better country, for a strong democracy. They can't take that, and it's a very powerful lesson for those of us who are not there. You are fighting. We can be there, too, in the fight

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

with you. You made a lot of calls for the international community to support the people of Burma. We will make sure we get those out there. I want to share with you that we are completely inspired by you, that we feel our sisterhood very strongly, and that will always be. Thank you so much for sharing your powerful story.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([51:51](#)):

I wanted to ask you before we go, we've seen on the internet lots of pictures of people holding up three fingers in the CDM movement. What does that mean?

Phyo Sandar Soe ([52:03](#)):

That is, you reject the coup. You mean the military junta, so three-finger salute to fight back the military junta.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([52:14](#)):

So we can hold up three fingers in solidarity with the people of Burma and rejecting the military coup.

Phyo Sandar Soe ([52:20](#)):

Yes. Sorry, let me pronounce in Burmese way with three-finger salute. In the fight we always say, “kyanawthoet de raanwal aaniner rapar mai.” We must win this fight.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([52:42](#)):

Since we recoded this interview in late June 2021, it's been reported in the press that major international fashion brands, including H&M, Primark, BESTSELLER, and others have begun returning to Myanmar saying we'll help workers and the people of Myanmar. But, as Sandar points out, we can't good jobs under Myanmar's military dictatorship where there is no rule of law, no unions, and no rights. Most workers and their unions are calling for no overseas investment.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([53:17](#)):

The United Nations General Assembly took the rare step of voting to formally condemn the coup, and called for an end to arms dealing with the country. A UN rights expert is calling on nations to impose sanctions on Myanmar's highly lucrative oil and gas sector, whose profits are going a long way to prop up the regime. While the United States has been a leader among nations, levying sanctions against the military junta and certain companies and individuals, activists are calling for more.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([53:52](#)):

When the military overthrew Myanmar's democratically elected government, the country's garment workers, most of them young women, were the first to stand up and defend their right to a free and peaceful society. They led the way for hundreds of thousands of women and men to stop working under the military junta and start the Civil Disobedience Movement. Many of these brave women and men, workers from nearly every sector of the economy, are now experiencing incredible hardship. While the headlines from 2021 have faded from the U.S. news, union leaders and advocates for democracy are still losing their jobs, their homes, their freedom, and even their lives. Friends and family members are being imprisoned and even killed. But as our conversation with Sandar shows, they are determined to keep up

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Myanmar Workers Stand Up for Democracy!

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Phyo Sandar Soe, Assistant General Secretary, Confederation of Trade Unions–Myanmar

the momentum, to join together and peacefully demand their rights to a government elected by the people.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([54:57](#)):

After the first military regime ended in 2010, thousands of workers were free to join unions where they exercised the power of collective action. They have now taken the power of that experience to stand side by side for democratic rights, joining together with the three-finger salute. We must win this fight!

Phyo Sandar Soe ([55:22](#)):

Kyanawthoet de raanpwal aaniner rapar mai!

Shawna Bader-Blau ([55:25](#)):

Sandar, words can't express how grateful I am to you for sharing with me and our listeners your incredible story. Thank you, sister Sandar, for your incredible bravery and leadership on behalf of workers in Myanmar, and for lifting up their voices here as they sacrifice everything for a better future, a democratic future, a future that values the rights of all.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([55:51](#)):

In the episode description, you will find resources to directly support Myanmar workers and learn more about actions the Civil Disobedience Movement is calling for from the international community to end the dictatorship.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([56:06](#)):

You can follow and subscribe to the Solidarity Center podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at solidaritycenter.org, and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network, and our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center, who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([56:48](#)):

For the Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.