On Labour Organisations in Myanmar

by Stephen Campbell

When Myanmar’s new Labour Organisation Law was promulgated in October 2011 it brought to an end a period of nearly 50 years during which independent workers’ organisations had been effectively prohibited. Amidst the more open political climate of reform-era Myanmar, labour-related organisations and workers’ unions have proliferated. The result is that some 500 organisations took part in the recent ILO-organised Labour Organisations Conference held in Yangon from 30 April to 1 May 2013.

Some rather chaotic events at the conference highlight a new set of challenges to workers in Myanmar as the liberalisation process has opened space for various actors seeking to shape the direction of the country’s labour movement. On the first day of the conference, The Myanmar Times reported that some of the organisations in attendance raised concerns over what appeared to be a large number of unfamiliar faces in the room. Notably, these concerns were raised by members of the influential 88 Generation Students, a prominent group of Myanmar activists and ex-political prisoners. According to an article in the Myanmar Times:

Some 88 Generation [Students] members and labour delegates said they doubted whether all of the participants were from registered labour organisations, suggesting some may have been planted to affect the outcome of the vote for a Myanmar delegate to send to the International Labour Conference in Geneva, Switzerland in June.

A Radio Free Asia video from the first day of the conference gives further details. In it, U Maung Maung, General Secretary of the Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB; recently renamed FTUM), states angrily that he will not take part in a conference that “has no rules” and, further, that the individuals and organisations which accompanied him to the conference are genuine workers and workers’ organisations. U Maung Maung then exits the conference hall with a contingent of his supporters. After U Maung Maung leaves, members of some remaining labour organisations go on to explain that FTUM and the organisations it brought along “have no position” in Myanmar.

What apparently took place (I was not in attendance) was that some conference participants suggested that FTUM had paid to bring in people who were not from established workers’ organisations; the aim being to secure the election of an FTUM member as Myanmar delegate to the upcoming ILO conference in June.

U Maung Maung’s return to Myanmar after more than two decades in exile, and the efforts of the FTUM to establish itself as an important player among domestic labour organisations, have been controversial from the start. In December last year, Phophtaw News reported that the Myanmar Industrial Trade Union (MITU) had rejected an invitation from FTUM to attend a meeting in Yangon with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which was visiting with a plan to set up an office in Myanmar. MITU chairperson U Ye Kyaw Thu stated that the reason for rejecting the FTUM’s invitation was that the FTUM “has no position in Myanmar”. This followed an earlier statement by the Agricultural and Farmers Federation of Myanmar (AFFM) in which the association said that it “will not become a member of FTUB because they [AFFM member organisations] don’t want to be under their [FTUM] control”. Around the same time, Phophtaw News reported critiques raised by some former FTUM members who said that FTUM “does not follow a true democratic system and their strict hierarchy has led to unbalanced internal decision making.”

Despite these critiques, U Maung Maung and the FTUM have strong backing from large international labour organisations like the ITUC and the AFL-CIO. Indeed, the FTUM remains the primary local partner through which these organisations engage with Myanmar’s labour movement. The ITUC, for example, of which the FTUM is an affiliate, has described U Maung Maung as “the leader of the country’s trade union movement”. Likewise, the AFL-CIO writes praising that “U Maung Maung spent the last 24 years nurturing the Burmese labor movement from his exile in Thailand”.

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Given its close relationship with the ITUC and the AFL-CIO, the FTUM’s approach to unionism largely follows the conservative model set out by these institutions. In a recent study of the FTUM, Dennis Arnold writes of the “top-down” approach adopted by the organisation:

the FTUB (FTUM) pursues a more traditional, hierarchical approach to trade unionism’s role in a democratic society based on the principles of tripartism, the presence of sector-specific unions, and the role of the state as mediator in capital-labour relations... [an approach] that discourages political or social movement unionism in favour of cooperative economic arrangements between capital and labour.

While members of the 88 Generation Students were among those voicing concern over the authenticity of certain conference participants, the approach to labour issues advocated by (at least some) members of this group does not differ radically from that of the FTUM. Ko Ko Gy, for example, a prominent 88 Generation Students member who has become involved in labour issues, stated last year:

Worker unions are needed now more than ever. And also owners need to be smarter. They need to understand that worker unions are not there to oppose the owners. They are just a group that will negotiate to solve the problems between the owners and workers. And us activists will help them to get a better future. Problems between workers and owners are like fights between family members. Regardless of how the family members are discordant, they have to meet each other. Owners and workers are the same too. Owners can’t run their business without workers and workers can’t live without owners.

Against this backdrop of competing organisations seeking to shape the future of Myanmar’s labour movement, workers in the country have taken it upon themselves to pursue a more confrontational approach. This was most dramatically seen in the wave of strikes that developed in the first half of last year. During May and June 2012, workers at a reported 90 factories in the Yangon area went on strike. In May 2012 alone, reported “36,810 workers from 57 factories staged strikes asking for better wages and working conditions”. Among the actions taken at this time, workers at the Hi-Mo wig factory occupied their workplace, barricaded management in the factory office and shouted down a government official sent to deal with the strike. Elsewhere, twenty-five steel workers in Hmawbi went on hunger strike over their demands for a wage increase.

In countries where unions have long been institutionalised, this divergence between the confrontational approaches of workers and the conservative approaches of trade union officials has fuelled efforts to democratise stagnant unions “from below” or to build alternative, rank-and-file movements that bypass existing union structures altogether. In Myanmar, by contrast, the hundreds of new unions that have emerged over the past year remain mostly small, enterprise-level associations. They have yet to develop a bureaucratic stratum of full-time officials claiming to represent workers’ interests. As such, Myanmar workers are in a position of relative freedom to set for themselves the direction of their country’s labour movement. This situation may not last, however, if these workers’ associations become subsumed by individuals or organisations seeking a mediating role between labour and capital. Much depends, therefore, on the extent to which Myanmar workers are able to keep their new unions thoroughly rank-and-file controlled, with decision-making power firmly in the hands of the union membership.

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