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Spotlight interview with Maung Maung (Federation of Trade Unions of Burma)

"Sanctions on insurance and financial services are a means of hitting the junta without penalising the poor"

Brussels, 5 June 2009 (ITUC OnLine): The FTUB (Federation of Trade Unions of Burma) held its first ever Congress in March 2009. Its general secretary, Maung Maung, talks about the Burmese trade union movement and the current state of affairs in Burma: international sanctions, the trial of Aung San Suu Kyi, the 2010 elections, the economic collapse, etc.

The first congress of the FTUB, held in Mae Sot (Thailand) in March 2009, was considered to be a great success. What has it done for your organisation?

After 20 years of fighting for a democratic Burma and for workers' rights in the country, this first congress was indeed a success. First of all, we adopted a constitution based on international standards. Then, we were able to secure the participation of workers from inside Burma and workers' rights were widely discussed during the congress. Over the years, the FTUB has built up a trade union network inside Burma. That's how we managed to secure the participation of representatives from a range of sectors such as textiles, clothing, health, education, agriculture, forestry and public services.

The FTUB continues to be illegal in Burma. How are these trade unionists able to represent workers when trade union activities are prohibited?

We are not officially in a position to bargain collectively, but workers can get together and ask their employer to respect their rights, if overtime is not paid, for example. We are happy to be able to operate in this way, at least, even though the junta refuses to officially register our organisation. It is an underground movement that is reaching cruising speed.

Do workers' representatives not face reprisals?

Twenty-eight FTUB members are currently serving long prison sentences because of their trade union activities. So there are risks, but at the moment, when representatives speak, all the other workers sit behind them. It provides the representatives with a physical presence, a source of support. We have seen cases where a representative has been fired on one pretext or another, for having arrived late, for example, but the workers protest, saying that if he is late, they are all late. Collective movements are therefore taking shape in workplaces.

What activities does the FTUB conduct outside of Burma?

Our main task is to raise awareness about the rights of workers living in

Burma, through media interviews, for example. We are working with the international trade union movement, the ITUC in particular, but also with a number of global union federations. The SUB (Seafarers Union of Burma), for example, is now affiliated to the ITF (International Transport Workers' Federation). The ITF has often worked with Thai trade unionists on the issue of the ships that come to the port of Bangkok using flags of convenience. The ITF Asia-Pacific regional secretary, Shigi Wada, went to Burma to try to convince the military junta to recognise the SUB, but to no avail thus far.

You also carry out a lot of solidarity action for Burmese migrants...

The FTUB has a migrant labour secretariat. There are almost 2 million Burmese migrants in Thailand; about 500,000 of these are registered. We are trying to raise their awareness about human trafficking. We tell them that when they are in a country where they have the chance to register, they should do so, as it means that they can then use the host country's legal and justice system. The FTUB also tries to provide migrants with legal representation. In Thailand, we are working with NGOs and the Law Society of Thailand to offer them this legal representation. We have won over ten cases that have concluded with the migrants being paid compensation, whether they are registered or not. There have been cases regarding unpaid wages, accidents at work, etc. We dealt with the case of a young woman, Masuu, burnt to death by her employer who was accusing her of theft. Her murderer, a Thai military officer, was sent to prison. The Thai justice system allows migrants to defend their rights. We also have our own school for migrants' children in Mae Sot, with over 240 pupils. It receives support from the union of the Japanese communications company NTT.

The FTUB also tries to organise Burmese migrants and have them join host country unions, because everyone benefits from unity between migrant workers and those of the host community. That's what we are doing in Thailand and in Malaysia, where we have 50,000 migrants, and we have also managed to form two Burmese migrants' union in Japan, which are registered with the authorities in compliance with Japanese legislation.

The FTUB and the ITUC are calling for heavier international economic sanctions against the military junta. What would you say to those who argue that sanctions do more harm to the poor people of Burma?

There will always be people who are against sanctions, especially in business circles. Having said that, the European Union's sanctions are having no impact, neither on the regime nor the people, because they only exist on paper. There is no mechanism for applying them within the 27 member states of the European Union. We have a database, for example, of all the products exported to EU countries which shows that the sanctions linked to the GSP (generalised system of preferences) are not applied. The ban on European visas for the leaders of the regime is a positive and encouraging sign in terms of morale, as it shows the regime that it is isolated from the international community, but it has no major impact in practical terms. It is very different in the United States, where all the customs and immigration systems are under the control of a single government. U.S. sanctions work, and the regime is worried about them, unlike the European sanctions.

We would like to see sanctions that have a direct impact on the regime, such

as in the area of financial services. The European Union could ban the Burmese junta's use of the euro in financial services, as the United States have done with the dollar. The insurance and reinsurance sector has nothing to do with the rice paddy or factory workers, etc. It does, however, affect the planes and ships in the hands of the regime's cronies, whose activities would be blocked if there was no insurance: their timber, their companies' products could no longer be exported if their ships were no longer insured. Insurance is only a small sector, but it has an impact on all the rest. We are therefore calling for sanctions targeting insurance and financial transactions.

According to some opponents of sanctions, they will have no impact whilst China continues to be an ally of the junta, because the generals will continue to trade with China...

That is not entirely accurate. The Chinese are good businessmen; they do not give the generals anything for nothing. On the contrary, everything that is exported to China is done so at very low prices, lower than international prices. Aside from a few traders in Yunnan province, trade with Burma is insignificant for the Chinese economy, which is huge. China wants stability in the region. Yet everyone knows that with such a regime, and with Aung San Suu Kyi in prison, there will never be any stability. China is well aware that Burma must evolve towards stability.

What about the trial of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been accused of letting an American swim to her home despite being under house arrest. This story seems absurd. Could the incident really have taken place the way the regime has presented it?

When Aung San Suu Kyi's lawyers asked the police if there were guards at the back of her house, they did not respond. Yet they are supposed to guard all around the house. It's strange... And then, the ex-wife of this American said that she was very surprised to hear that he had swum so far, given that he suffers from chronic asthma. To swim so far, in the dark, carrying supplies, you would have to be a soldier trained in special operations, which you can see by looking at his photo that this man is clearly not. We do not think he was operating alone. We are not saying he is a spy, but that he was unwittingly part of a scheme. He may claim that he was acting according to his own conscience, but I think that a third party pushed him in this direction in order to keep Aung San Suu Kyi out of public sight, to stop her from taking part in the 2010 elections.

Why is the FTUB calling for a boycott of the 2010 elections?

The main reason is the Constitution adopted following the 2008 referendum, held two weeks after Cyclone Nargis, which led to 100,000 deaths in Burma. Everyone thought that the referendum would be postponed, but the regime went ahead with it. It was neither fair nor free, and even before it was held, the National Convention that drew up the draft Constitution was not representative. Our national leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, should have been one of the figures involved, but she was under house arrest for the entire period during which the draft Constitution was being drawn up, which lasted 10 years! Aung San Suu Kyi's party won the last elections in 1990. It was there at the beginning of the discussions on the new Constitution, but as soon as it started to ask questions and to ask for

amendments, it was denied any participation.

There are other problems linked to this Constitution. The ethnic groups who, like all of us, want a federal system in Burma were not able to discuss it. And then, the military said that they would have 25% of the seats in parliament, without even standing for election. The Constitution also prohibits a whole series of Burmese people from standing for election: those who have lived outside Burma for five years or more, those who are married to foreigners, those who have a child that has been living outside of Burma for five years or more... All of this shows that the regime has introduced clauses into the Constitution that will allow it to ban Aung San Suu Kyi from taking part in the elections. Amendments are needed to allow all these people to be candidates.

Is a bad election not better than no election at all?

The current generals will not give up their control over the country. There is no chance of a lesser evil being elected.

The ILO is implementing a project against forced labour in Burma. Is the FTUB satisfied with this programme?

We would like this project to be extended, with the opening of a second ILO office in the country, so that more people can report cases of forced labour to the ILO. The FTUB is satisfied with the current office: its employees have tried to visit the places where the victims of forced labour come from and there are more people who know that they can interact with the ILO. They are still reticent, but as compared with last year, the number of people filing complaints has substantially increased. It's a positive thing, because we have to let people know that the ILO is there for them, that they have the right to testify.

In September 2007, the rise in the cost of living sparked demonstrations. What is the economic situation now?

A person holding a management position, who speaks English and has a degree, earns around 150,000 kyat a month (150 dollars on the black market). A factory worker earns around 30 dollars a month, but if you look at the wage slip, you will see that the basic is only around 3,500 kyat (3.50 dollars) a month, and then there's the overtime (around 5,000 kyat), the wages for Saturdays and Sundays, ... If you only work 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, you only earn 3.50 dollars a month! Yet rice, the staple food in Burma, costs about a dollar a day for a family of three. So unless both parents work, there is no way of having something to eat every day.

Many people are without fixed employment. On the outskirts of Rangoon, a family gets up early, prepares food for breakfast and lunch, then they clean the plates and take them, along with covers, clothes and a mosquito net, to someone who gives them money in exchange. The father then goes to Rangoon with this money to look for work. The mother and child wait for him to come back. When he comes home, if he has enough money to buy back the things pawned in the morning, they can recover them. Sometimes the man does not come back, because he is ashamed of not having found work in town. In one industrial zone, there is a place called "Lin-Hmaw-Gone" which means "the place where you look forward to your husband coming back", because many

people go there in the morning to the local pawnbroker.

Yet Burma has a wealth of natural resources...

We have offshore oil and gas. We sell it to Thailand and we are supposed to sell it to China and India, but where is the electricity for the population? In Rangoon, at night, they have to alternate the electricity supply between neighbourhoods. Children still have to study by candlelight! We also export the best wood in the world, especially to Europe, but the victims of Cyclone Nargis still don't have a home because they do not have the money to buy the timber.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

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