

# MYANMAR

## THE NEW UNION FRONTIER

### profile

Country: **Myanmar**

Text: **Petra Brännmark**

Unions: **Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFM), Mining Workers Federation of Myanmar (MWFM)**



**As of January 2015, IndustriALL counts two trade unions from Myanmar among its members. In a country where unions have only been legal since 2012, organizing and training are crucial in building worker power.**

Myanmar is under transition from a military junta, which seized power in 1962. A constitutional referendum in 2008 allowed for general elections in 2010, and since then the government has launched a number of democratic and economic reforms. In 2012 trade unions became legal, and union leaders in exile were allowed to return to the country.

In December 2014 the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFM) and the Mining Workers Federation of Myanmar (MWFM) joined IndustriALL Global Union. Both trade unions are affiliated to the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM), one of three central confederations in the country.

So far in 2015, the MWFM has increased its membership from 3,500 to 5,000. The IWFM has almost 7,000 members and is aiming for 20,000 at the end of 2015.

Khaing Zar Aung is Assistant General Secretary of IWFM, as well as treasurer of CTUM. She became involved in the trade

union movement in 2007, while working in garment factories on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Leaving school at 16 to help support her seven siblings, Khaing Zar Aung got a job in a textile factory in Myanmar by lying about her age. When the employer fired her for being under-age (the legal working age in Myanmar is 18), Khaing Zar Aung found work in the factories on the other side of the border in Thailand.

There, she was working alongside children as young as 13 and 14 who wanted to go back to school.

“I was struck by the poor living standards, how workers were exploited, and how little or no chance they had to improve their lives. So I went to a trade union training session and since then I have not stopped.”

“Back then we informed migrant workers in Thailand of their rights, and as trade unions were illegal in Myanmar, we invited workers to come to Thailand for training.”

#### **Hurdles on the way**

Although trade unions are legal today, Khaing Zar Aung says that changing people's behaviour takes time. Many people are still afraid to join a union for fear of repercussions.



**Unions in Myanmar are working hard to tackle precarious work. In 2015, the MWFM has so far managed to grant 450 temporary mine workers permanent employment.**



“Parents don’t want their children to join a union and the laws protecting workers are very weak. So we need awareness training for the workers, to teach them about their rights.”

Employers are often not used to collective bargaining and workers’ rights. There is a great need to build functioning labour-management relations at factory level, which will require training of both union and management representatives.

It is illegal to dismiss a worker who joins a union, and yet the IWFM is constantly seeing such cases. A proposal to impose jail sentences for this offence was rejected by Parliament; instead the penalty was increased from US\$100 to US\$500.



## SUCCESSFUL COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

**Members of IWFM at Japanese owned garment factory, Sakura, managed to secure a one-year collective bargaining agreement with an 18 per cent wage increase. After two weeks of silent protests where the 688 workers wore red armbands every day, the union signed an agreement increasing the basic wage from US\$110 to US\$118 per month.**

“We are seeing cases where union leaders are put under pressure and harassed in the workplace. For example union leaders are not given leave for the two paid days to organize, which they are legally entitled to. And sometimes company management encourage unionists to quit union work.”

Forming and officially registering a union in Myanmar is not straightforward. According to the law, a minimum of 30 workers can form a union. In addition to that, ten per cent of the workers have to vote in favour of the union.

The Labour Ministry has the task of registering new unions, which should be done within 60 days. With the current backlog more than 1,000 unions are pending registration – some have been waiting for more than a year.

IndustriALL general secretary Jyrki Raina, who visited the country in March this year, says:

“Myanmar needs solid, durable labour-management structures at local and national levels, as essential pillars of the future democratic society.”

Nevertheless Khaing Zar Aung is optimistic about the future, where she sees the unions speaking with an ever-stronger voice.

“We need to increase awareness of workers’ rights and train our members in collective bargaining. We are fighting for a living wage and laws that protect the workers.”



## Minimum wage on its way

At the moment there is no set minimum wage in Myanmar. The average salary is around US\$100 per month, with big sectoral differences. Apart from the basic wage, a living allowance, overtime bonus, attendance bonus, skill bonus, and finally a sum depending on the length of employment is added.

Overtime requires an extra 12-16 hours per week, in addition to the 44-46 hour working week.

“Our members are fighting for a living wage,” says Khaing Zar Aung. “The salary is so low that the workers are suffering – we demand basic wages and proper working hours.”

## MYANMAR NUMBERS

- 1,400 individual trade unions
- 650 unions are affiliated to CTUM
- 17 labour laws, currently reviewed by the Labour Ministry with the help of the International Labour Organization (ILO)

The government in Myanmar is in the process of setting a minimum wage and hopes to have it ready this spring. Jyrki Raina stresses the importance of setting a basic minimum wage that is sufficient to live on.

“In order to prevent social unrest it is important to confirm a sufficiently high minimum wage as soon as possible and to promote collective bargaining. Workers must have reasonable working hours, a healthy and safe workplace, and the right to join a union.”

- 1 Armband worn by the workers at the Sakura garment factory during their successful silent strike. *IndustriALL*
- 2 Maung Maung, Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM) President, who spent 24 years in exile before returning to Myanmar in 2012, together with Khaing Zar Aung. *IndustriALL*
- 3 On 8 March, International Women’s Day, the CTUM organized a capacity building event in one of Yangon’s industrial zones, Hlaing That Yar. Women listened to the Deputy Labour Minister Dan Win Maw Tun talk about social security, and were offered free check-ups for cervical and breast cancer. *IndustriALL*
- 4 Workers at the Sakura garment factory in Yangon. *IndustriALL*