

## OPINION PIECE

# The fight is not over: From Geneva to the ground, trade unions stand with the people of Myanmar

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It has now been one month since the adoption of the [Resolution concerning the measures recommended by the Governing Body under article 33 of the ILO Constitution on the subject of Myanmar](#) at the 113th International Labour Conference (ILC), which was held from 2 to 13 June 2025 in Geneva.

Some may regard this as a milestone, even a temporary conclusion to our long struggle. However, the Resolution is not the endpoint. It is merely a tool for us to achieve our ultimate goal: restoring freedom and dignity in Myanmar. Our movement's fight for democracy in Myanmar must continue until this Resolution is fully and effectively implemented.

## The Commission of Inquiry's Report

Article 33 of the ILO Constitution provides that if a Member State of the International Labour Organization (ILO) fails to carry out the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry (COI) within the specified period, the ILO Governing Body may recommend to the ILC any action it deems wise and expedient to secure compliance.

Here, we will review the COI report. Spanning over 200 pages, it lays bare the severe and widespread violations of international labour standards in Myanmar following the military coup of 2021.

[Convention C087 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 \(No. 87\).](#)

The COI found that the military regime committed grave and systemic violations of Convention No. 87. In particular, the military regime imposed extensive restrictions on basic civil liberties that underpin freedom of association, such as the rights to expression, assembly, and protection from arbitrary arrest. Trade union leaders and members faced killings, torture, arbitrary detention, surveillance, and exile. Meanwhile, women trade unionists were subjected to violent and sexual abuse.

Union activities were effectively paralysed: leaders were unable to organise, register unions, hold elections, conduct trainings, or represent members. Registration was obstructed, with unions pressured to return certificates and re-elect leadership under duress. Genuine and legitimate unions faced harassment, while state-backed or "yellow" unions were promoted.

The COI concluded that these acts breached multiple provisions of Convention No. 87, including:

- Article 2 (right to form organisations without prior authorisation);
- Article 3 (freedom of administration and activities); and
- Article 4 (protection from dissolution by administrative authority).

### **Convention C029 - Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)**

The COI determined that the Myanmar military systematically perpetrated forced labour. Civilians were coerced into military work — including portering, guiding, construction, and domestic labour — and used as human shields. Businesses were pressured to continue operations during civil protests under threats of punishment.

The COI also condemned the use of prison labour, especially as convictions lacked due process. It also rejected the regime's claim that these practices qualified as permissible exceptions in the Convention. It also underscored the ineffectiveness of enforcement against forced labour, the dormant complaint mechanism since 2021, and the legal loopholes, such as the Article 359 of Myanmar's Constitution, which permits forced labour "in the interests of the people".

These systemic abuses constituted clear violations of Articles 1 and 25 of Convention No. 29, which obligate Myanmar to eliminate forced labour in all its forms and ensure effective enforcement.

## **Recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry**

### **Immediate actions directed to the military authorities**

Like the United Nations and other international organisations, the ILO does not recognise the Myanmar military authorities as the legitimate representatives of Myanmar. However, the COI determined that "the Myanmar military authorities, irrespective of the country's representation in the Organization, are accountable for any of their acts or omissions that have an impact on the application of Conventions Nos. 87 and 29 ratified by Myanmar." Thus, it accordingly recommended that the military authorities urgently take the following actions:

#### **Convention No. 87:**

- Immediately cease violence, torture, and harassment of trade unionists.
- Unconditionally release all union leaders detained for legitimate activities.
- Withdraw criminal charges related to peaceful protest and trade union work.
- Stop all intimidation and surveillance and return revoked citizenship and passports.
- Repeal post-coup legal restrictions and military orders limiting civil liberties.
- End interference in union formation and operation, and cease promoting employer-dominated unions.

#### **Convention No. 29:**

- End all forms of forced labour, including by the army and affiliated groups.
- Halt forced military recruitment, especially of minors.
- Stop pressuring businesses to operate during protests.
- Cease prison labour perpetrated after illegitimate trials.
- Ensure due process and judicial independence in any penal labour decisions.

## Recommendations for the period following the restoration of democratic governance

The COI issued additional recommendations for Myanmar to implement once democratic governance is restored. These include ensuring that the Constitution and laws fully uphold freedom of association and protection from forced labour, in line with ILO Convention Nos. 87 and 29. Myanmar should resume labour law reforms, establish an effective labour inspectorate and dispute resolution mechanisms, and ensure judicial capacity to protect these rights.

Regarding **Convention No. 87**, Myanmar is urged to investigate violations of civil liberties against trade unionists since February 2021, and create a safe environment for workers' and employers' organisations to operate freely. It must ensure adequate resources for labour authorities to enable them to implement freedom of association effectively.

Concerning **Convention No. 29**, the Myanmar government must:

- Assess and improve its institutions responsible for combating forced labour;
- Ensure access for trade unions and employers to report abuse;
- End forced labour against Rohingya and other minorities;
- Address discrimination by engaging directly with affected communities.
- Reform the national service systems and lift restrictions on civil servant resignations, aligning them with international standards;
- Strengthen penalties and enforcement mechanisms to eliminate forced or compulsory labour.

## Final observations of the Commission of Inquiry

The COI underscores the urgent need for Myanmar's legal and institutional frameworks to align with international standards protecting civil liberties and fundamental rights. It reaffirms that respect for all ILO fundamental principles — including equality and non-discrimination — as essential to rebuilding a peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous society.

Given the scale and gravity of the military junta's violations, the COI calls for a peaceful transition back to democratic governance. It stresses that such a transition is necessary for the effective implementation of Conventions Nos. 87 and 29. It also urges the international community to provide robust support, especially for individuals displaced or persecuted due to the crisis caused by the military junta-led rollback of democracy.

Finally, the COI honours the courage of Myanmar's people who provided testimony, often at personal risk. It recognises that their voices are a testament to the ongoing struggle for freedom and dignity in Myanmar.

## Workers and trade unions now have a critical role

The adoption of the Resolution by the International Labour Conference is not the end of our struggle — it is a renewed call to action. It is a collective commitment to ensure that the abuses of the military junta are not met with silence, but with the continued fight for restoration of democracy in Myanmar through mobilisation, advocacy, and solidarity.

As General Secretary of the ITUC Asia-Pacific, I say this clearly: **workers and trade unions now have a critical role to play in this fight.**

We must act on multiple fronts — with solidarity, with power, and with urgency — by taking the following actions:

### **1. Raise awareness**

Trade unions must raise awareness nationally about the Resolution and its core demands — namely, the immediate end to violence and forced labour, the unconditional release of detained trade unionists, and the restoration of fundamental freedoms in Myanmar. Awareness is the foundation of mobilisation. Without it, these violations remain hidden, normalised, or dismissed as distant problems. Raising awareness can drive collective pressure on governments and institutions, build international solidarity, and ensure that the voices of Myanmar's workers are echoed across borders and movements.

### **2. Demand accountability**

Trade unions must call on their governments, employers' organisations, and civil society allies to review and suspend any relationships with Myanmar's military authorities that may enable repression or forced labour. This includes halting trade in goods and services, such as jet fuel or equipment that directly support the junta.

### **3. Strengthen solidarity**

Trade unions must continue to support the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM) and the tripartite representatives of the National Unity Government, and echo their call for a swift and peaceful return to democracy. Their resilience demands that the international trade union movement matches it with unwavering solidarity.

### **4. Influence multilateral institutions**

Through advocacy and campaigns, trade unions must demand multilateral institutions, including the ILO, the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the international financial institutions to align their policies with the Resolution and refuse to legitimise the junta in any form.



**The global labour movement has always risen to meet injustice with action. Now, more than ever, we must raise our voices in support of the people of Myanmar. With every campaign, every act of solidarity, and every refusal to stay silent, we move one step closer to returning Myanmar to its people.**



**The fight is not over.** But with unity and determination, restoring democracy in Myanmar is possible.