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President Michele O'Neil Secretary Sally McManus

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
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22 April 2021

Public hearing on Myanmar

Dear Committee Secretary,

On behalf of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Foreign Affairs and Aid Sub-Committee Public Hearing on Myanmar to provide a briefing on the current situation facing workers and trade unions in Myanmar, and how Australia can support a return to democratic rule.

The Australian Union movement has been a longstanding supporter of democratic reform and has links with the trade union movement in Myanmar, including through the ACTU's affiliation to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), ACTU affiliates work with their Global Union Federations (GUFs), and Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's project work and office in Yangon. Trade unions are at the forefront of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar, and as such have been brutally targeted by the regime:

- Trade unionists have been killed, arrested, threatened and charged for participating in protests and strike actions;
- Union leaders are being hunted by the military and many are now in hiding;
- Sixteen unions and workers' rights organisations have been declared illegal by the regime;
- Workers have been terminated or had their wages withheld for participating in strikes and protests, and many are now struggling to feed their families.

In addition, there are humanitarian crises looming on the borders with Thailand and India. The Australian Union movement is gravely concerned about the situation for workers and the people of Myanmar, and urges the Australian Government, as a leader in our region, to take strong action to support a return to democracy. In particular, the Australian Government must:

- Enact sanctions against the military, its leaders, its business interests and business partners. This must include military conglomerates MEC, MEHL and MOGE.
- Recognise the National Unity Government (NUG) formed on 16 April 2021 (formally CRPH - Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw), the representative body of the democratically elected Myanmar MPs.
- Not ratify the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) regional trade agreement, which includes Myanmar. By entering into a new trade agreement with the military junta, Australia risks legitimizing and further entrenching the regime.
- Require Australian businesses operating in Myanmar to suspend their operations until democracy is restored. Given the extensive business interests of the coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and the military, any multinational currently operating in Myanmar risks legitimising the coup and funding the military regime.

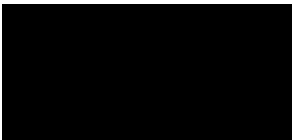
- Provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the CDM which has erupted nationally in opposition to the military coup, as well as cross-border humanitarian assistance to those fleeing the violence on the Thai-Myanmar and India borders.

The workers of Myanmar are putting their lives and livelihoods on the line in taking protest and strike action to bring the economy to a halt and end the military regime. By failing to act on implementing sanctions, failing to recognise the democratically elected Government, pushing ahead with ratifying RCEP, and failing to require businesses to suspend operations, the Australian Government is undermining their efforts.

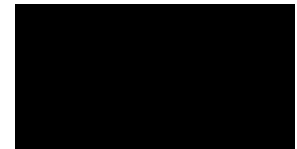
The Australian Government must also protect the people from Myanmar currently living in Australia by providing visa extensions and protection visas to students and others unable to return, including stateless Rohingya refugees, and accept all asylum seekers and refugees from Myanmar.

The Australian Union movement stands in solidarity with the people of Myanmar and looks forward to seeing strong recommendations issued by the Committee advising the Australian Government to take urgent action to support a return to democracy in Myanmar.

Yours sincerely



Michele O'Neil
President
ACTU



Kate Lee
Executive Officer
Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA