

Open Letter

19 February 2010

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The ASEAN Secretariat,
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Heads of Government of
Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia,
Lao PDR, Malaysia, Burma (Myanmar), Philippines,
Singapore, Thailand & Viet Nam,
c/o Secretary General of ASEAN

Dear Sirs/Madam,

**Re: Justice for Workers in Burma
3,600 Workers Protest for Worker Rights – February 2010**

On 8/2/2010, about 3,600 factory workers, mostly women, from 3 factories in the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone in Rangoon, Burma, protested against low wages and the substandard working conditions they are forced to endure in the factories.

It was reported that the workers at the Taiyee shoe factory and the Opal 2 garment factory began protests on Monday calling for higher daily wages, overtime payments and several other demands. On Tuesday, workers from the Kya Lay garment factory joined the strike action.

The workers, mostly women, staged protests outside the factories and inside a factory compound, where they sat down and refused to work. The three factories employ a total of about 3,600 workers.

The monthly income of most factory workers in Burma is very low, ranging from 20,000 kyat [USD20] to 40,000 kyat [USD40], thus forcing many workers to work overtime. Most workers work from 7 am to 11 pm daily. Many factory owners employ temporary workers who have no legal recourse if they are fired without compensation, according to former factory workers in Rangoon. More than 80 percent of factory workers in Rangoon work on a day-to-day basis. Most are young women between 15 and 27 years of age who come from the countryside in search of a better living.

[The Irrawaddy, Authorities Threaten Violence at Rangoon Strike – http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17771]

The workers' demands in these actions, for example, with regard to wages, as was reported, are for a mere USD10 increase per month.

The Burmese government's response to this legitimate industrial action by workers was excessive and oppressive. It was reported that, the "...Authorities used barbed wire barricades to block roads leading to the factories in the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone in the city's north-east, and more than 50 truckloads of riot police carrying batons and shields were deployed and at least six fire engines and five prison vans were parked near the factories..." [AP - *Straits Times*, 10/2/2010, *Myanmar workers on strike*]

Today (19/2/2010) although the workers are back in the factories, they continue demanding for their rights. In Burma, they are even more vulnerable and powerless without a change in the existing laws to allow the right to assembly and to allow workers the right to form unions.

Burma is a member of ASEAN, and as such we call upon ASEAN and all ASEAN member countries to do the needful to ensure that workers in Burma, just like other workers in other ASEAN countries, also receive just wages, have a safe and healthy working environment, enjoy the right to form unions and all other universally acknowledged worker and human rights.

We also call on ASEAN, and ASEAN member countries to closely monitor the current situation at the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone, and ensure that these workers rights are recognized and respected, and that the Burmese government refrains from further interfering in this pursuit of rights by workers in Burma.

Further, on 23 October 2009, the Heads of State/Government of ASEAN presided over the Inaugural Ceremony of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), during which they also announced the "Cha-am Hua Hin Declaration on the Inauguration of the AICHR" to pledge full support to this new ASEAN body and emphasize their commitment to further develop cooperation to promote and protect human rights in the region.

Noting that the primary purpose of the AICHR is to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of the peoples of ASEAN, we hope that the AICHR will begin proving that it is not merely a toothless tiger by ensuring that the human rights of these workers in Burma are promoted and protected.

Many ASEAN member countries, like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, invest significantly in Burma. We hope that these economic and other self-interest considerations will not affect the way ASEAN, and its member nations, respond to human rights violations of the ordinary people and workers in ASEAN.

I look forward to hearing your response,

Yours sincerely,

-sgd-

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For and on behalf of the **56 Organizations/groups** listed below:-

ALTSEAN-BURMA

All Kachin Students and Youth Union
All Burma Federation of Student Unions (Foreign Affairs' Committee)
Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and development (APWLD)
Asia Pacific Solidarity Coalition (APSOC)
Asian Migrants Center(AMC)
Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL) – Youth and Women
'Alltogether', the South Korean left organization
Amnesty International Philippines
Batis Aware, Philippines
Burma Global Action Network
Burmese Women's Union (BWU)
Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan
Burma Campaign, Malaysia
Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB)
Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) Philippines
Center for Overseas Workers (COW)
Coalition against Trafficking in Women – Asia Pacific
Chin Democracy and Human Rights Network (South Korea)
Civil Society Committee of LLG Cultural Development Centre Bhd(LLGCSC),
Malaysia
Committee for Asian Women (CAW)
Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility (CARAM) Asia
Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS)
Empower Foundation, Thailand
Free Burma Coalition Philippines (FBC-Philippines)
Free Burma Coalition – Philippines (Women's Committee)
Foundation for Education and Development, Thailand
Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB)
Human Rights and Development Foundation (Thailand)
Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID)
JERIT (Oppressed People's Network, Malaysia)
Kachin Development Networking Group
Korean House for International Solidarity, KHIS
Labour Behind the Label, United Kingdom
MAP Foundation, Thailand
Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC)
MSC/NWC- Sri Lanka,
MAKALAYA (Women Workers Network)

Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)
National League for Democracy [NLD (LA)], Malaysia
Network of Action for Migrants in Malaysia (NAMM)
Network for Democracy and Development
Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia, PSM)
Pagkakaisa ng Kababaihan para sa Kalayaan (KAISA-KA)
Piglas Kababaihan
Partido ng Manggagawa (PM - Workers' Party)
Seoul-Gyeonggi-Incheon Migrants' Trade union (MTU), Korea
Studio Xang Art for Migrant Children, Thailand
Thai Labour Campaign (TLC), Thailand
Think Center (Singapore)
The Action Network for Migrants (ANM), Thailand
The Shan Refugee Organization (SRO), Malaysia
Task Force on ASEAN and Burma (TFAB)
Worker Hub for Change (WH4C)
Women Health, Philippines
World March for Women - Philippines

c.c. Workers in Burma - solidarityburma@gmail.com