

The Role of Myanmar Workers in Independence Struggle

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Abstract

After the annexation of Lower Myanmar by the British, the capitalist economy conditions were established. To practise the capitalist economic system, worker class became arisen with the factories, workshops and production and manufacturing. As the British not only exploited in economy but also suppressed in politics, Myanmar workers were rigidly poor in economy, sociality and politics. In 1920s, the whole workers class started to organize in opposition of imperialist, national independence and to get the privileges of the mass of workers while the political associations, students and monks led to struggle in politics. After the Labour Union or Myanmar Workers Association was firstly formed from Myanmar oil field, workers associations gradually emerged from the appeal of the need of workers from the Companies of Imperialist with the leading of such associations. The worker leaders carried out organizing movements with the help of Dobamar Asiayone. Each and every worker's associations were against the imperialists by asking for workers affairs. The national freedom was together with the independence movements. After socialism became widely spread, the movement of workers was associated with opposition of imperialism, national freedom, independence and anti-fascist Japan movement. During the pre- and post-second World War, the movement of workers was found in the form of strike and during the war, in the form of revolution. Workers movements happened together with the national movement. The importance of the role of workers movements till the independence obtained in 1948 was presented in this paper.

Key words: Myanmar Workers Association, Anti-fascist Japan movement, Capitalist Economic System

Introduction

As Myanmar is a country rich in under and above land resources, imperialists were interested in it. Therefore, from the 17th century, Portuguese, English, France imperialists tried to annex Myanmar as their colony. Their purpose was to extract the resources in Myanmar in cheap expense, to use the labour of Myanmar races cheaply to import the raw materials produced in low rate and for sale the finished products with much profits in their colonies. The British conquered Myanmar three times, first in 1824, second in 1852, and third in 1885. After that the British imperialists suppressed Myanmar systematically. They established factories year by year to produce unfinished goods in order to import the raw materials easily. Such factories were not for the benefits of Myanmar nationalities but for the imperialists.¹ From that time, wages workers class emerged.²

It was clear that Myanmar workers who were under British did not have the right to get enough wages but they had unfair working hours. Their living standard was very low. Under the bad conditions of being exploited by employers, the condition of workers was very bad as the First World War broke out in 1914-1918. Although the price of goods rose during the War, it didn't fall down after World War I. In spite of rising prices, the wages for workers remained stable as before.

The commerce in Myanmar became prosperous yearly. The British employers employed the workers from India by the head of the Kulee. So the Indian workers became immigrants of Myanmar.³

Background history of workers condition

Myanmar was a country which was based on agriculture. 95% of Myanmar people earned their living by farming. It was a traditional earning living task. Myanmar people were interested only in farming but they were not interested in doing other work. The capitalist kept brokers, land owners, money lenders in their farming and a representative in trade.⁴

The capitalists invested in Myanmar and got much profit, especially from navigation, oil, timber and rice. Until the end of 19th century the number of Indian workers who came to work in Myanmar¹, annually increased to three hundred thousand and the number of returned Indian workers were one hundred thousand.⁵

In Myanmar, during the Second World War, Myanmar workers were cruelly suppressed by Japan reign. With the blood and sweat of Myanmar nationalities, Thailand-Myanmar road was constructed as a palace of sweat. In Myanmar history, the cruelty of the Japanese upon Myanmar workers was a distinct mark until nowadays⁶.

Revolution of Facist Japan and Myanmar independence fight

In March in 1943, Bamar modern government collected 20,000 Myanmar workers again in accordance with Nipon Military government to build railways. Myanmar Defense and Independence Army was called Blood Army by sacrificing blood in getting Independence and Railway Workers Army was called Sweat Army by sacrificing sweat in building railway.⁷

In accordance with the above conditions, in fascist Japan revolution, workers, farmers, students, national races and civilians were formed into guerilla together with Myanmar Army and they were successful in battle with the death of 20,000 Japanese.⁸ The communist party led by Thakhins, People Revolutionary Party and Myanmar's Army fought against Fascist with the help of people and Asian youth in 1945⁹. But Myanmar was under the British reign again and Myanmar people were suppressed under Bureaucrat and Imperialists. So, independence for all was confined as the basic political objective. Labour Union of Burma was systematically formed on 30th May, 1945¹⁰. After the fascist revolution, Anti-Fascist and People Freedom League (AFPFL) was reformed. The AFPFL league was people's front army. The Associate Committee was formed by ABTUC, led by Burma Communist Party and TUCB led by Burma Socialist Party. It was intended to unite labour organizations and to form a major labour organization. AFPFL had laid down work schedules to form the association for people and to make attempt to gain independence. In May, 1945, Department of Labour was founded. In that department, a committee was formed to organize people and to struggle for independence which was led by Tha Khin Mya, Tha Khin Tin, U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein. Burma Communist Party and Burma Socialist Party made decisions on labour affairs at the first nation-wide conference of AFPFL on 27th January, 1947.³

The prominent events in the history of Myanmar independence struggle was the general strike of countrywide government staff. The strike of police and government staff was strongly recommended by the people who supported AFPFL. The labourers from Trade Union Congress (Burma), TUCB, led by Burma Socialist Party and those from ABTUC, led by Burma Communist Party participated in that strike¹⁰.

Over 600 staff from post office labour association led by TUCB, held a meeting and boycott to raise costs of living allowance, home rent and right for taking leave at Aphwa Khet Zayat, Shwedagon Pagoda on 15th September, 1946.¹⁰

On 17th September, 1946, workers mass meeting was held. At that meeting, Dedode U Ba Cho acted as the chairman and Tha Khin Hla Kyway as the master of ceremonies. The following resolutions were laid down.

- **The strikes of police and post-office were recommended.**
- **The government had to go along with just demand of that strike in a hurry.**
- **To make a strike of general workers on 21st September, 1946, with the intention of opposing white paper of British who governed Myanmar so long.**

After the revolution had been made, with the origination of police strike on 5th September, 1946, there happened nation-wide general strike distinctly including the staff from post-office, telegraph, railway, and navigation. Due to that strike, British Bureaucrat administration came to a stop. In the same time, the strike of 6000 workers appeared which was led by TUCB. Dockyard workers, vest factory workers, Bargayar dockyard workers, Yangon municipal sweepers, Mahlwagone timber factory workers and government storage workers participated in those strikes. So a commission was formed to make appeal the workers' loss of right and to compromise between employers and employees. Such commission was formed on 6th November, 1946. However, that commission couldn't perform well because of the conditions in politics.¹¹ The AFPFL league sent the ultimatum with three facts to the British government. In that ultimatum, it was claimed:

- **to announce independence during a year, last dated on 31st January, 1946.**
- **to change the present cabinet into authorized National Government and**
- **to carry out the projects by the decision of the AFPFL league.**

To absolute independence

The British Prime Minister Clement Richard Attlee announced to acknowledge Myanmar, under the British parliament as an independent country outside or inside the British Commonwealth. Besides, a Myanmar representative was invited to come to England to discuss for Myanmar's independence. On 2nd January, 1947, while Myanmar representatives led by Bogyoke Aung San, went to England to appeal for independence, the workers who supported it held a meeting on 14th January, 1947. Then, AFPFL league separately discussed with responsible persons of Labour Union.

After that, a meeting of preliminary discussion was held at No. 8, Kominkochin road, where AFPFL league was situated on 15th January, 1947.¹² It lasted for one week as the strike appeal was intensively discussed. The last appeals were accepted and on 26th January, 1947, general workers meeting was held and defined to make a strike for their appeal.¹³

There was a general strike on 26th January, 1947, with the combination of ABTUC and TUCB labour union to strengthen struggle for independence. After that general strike, there appeared guerilla strikes continuously. Pre-War strike in the year 1300 was important. Post-War general strike played a major role in independence struggle.¹⁴

After Myanmar representatives, led by Bogyoke Aung San and the British representatives had discussed for Myanmar's independence, Aung San – Attlee strike. The agreement was signed on 27th January, 1947. Before that agreement, there was tension for Myanmar independence. To encourage those discussions, ABTUC and TUCB as well as Myanmar's United Trade Union Organization (UTUO) and clerks and workers from foreign

companies were involved in the objective of the strike was to give support for independence struggle and to gain political and economic demands.¹⁵

After Bogyoke Aung San and representatives had returned from England, 24 demands from general strike were solved by forming emergency committee. In that way, the resolutions in connection with the demands presented to peoples Hluttaw meeting held in Kandawmin park on 19th February. On 20th February, it was decided to call off the general strike.¹ Rehabilitation conference was held at Soranto villa building, Pyay road, Yangon on 6th June, 1947 under Bogyoke Aung San's leadership. In that conference, plans were made for two years economic progress. Tasks for workers affairs were included in that plan. According to the descriptions in that plan, there had to be Worker Exchange Department in Yenanchaung, Mandalay, Taungoo, and Dawei in 1948.⁸ Bogyoke Aung San went to Britain for Myanmar's absolute independence. After his return, he organized workers, peasants and all people living in the whole country as he foresaw the danger of British divide and rule policy. He especially founded national unity. Pinlon Agreement was successfully signed on 12th February, 1947¹⁶. But, Bogyoke Aung San died on 19th July, 1947 while making attempts for independence because of the British personal servants. Ceremony for giving special consideration of multi-national races was held on 27th July, 1947 in honour of the perished leaders. AFPFL league held the second AFPFL nation-wide conference at Myoma school, old east horse-race field, Yangon from 20th to 23rd December, 1947.¹⁵ In that conference, fourteen proposals were confined. They were:

- English Myanmar independence
- International affairs – Rehabilitation
- Union national uniformity
- Establishment of economic plans and industries
- Peasants' affairs
- Defense
- Indemnity for those who died in independence struggle and for those who were severely wounded
- Workers affairs
- Corruption and misuse of authority to be vanished
- Opposition to disturbed elements of the stability of the state
- Women's affairs
- AFPFL to be united
- Education¹⁷

Concerning the international relationship, Myanmar worker representatives were invited to attend eastern Asia Labour Conference held in New Deli on 27th October, 1947 and they attended that conference.³

It could be said that the workers became more united by celebrating the world labour union day (May day) inviting the representatives from all the countries in Asia. And it was known that during World War II, starting from 1942, May day was not held in Myanmar while it was governed by the fascist Japanese. However, in 1946-47, the mass of workers in Myanmar went on celebrating a show of strength on May Day. Continuous national struggle for independence of the working people had caused Myanmar as an independent country on

4th January, 1948. After four months of independence, the mass of workers in Myanmar held 58th May day. Although it was 58th May day worldwide for the mass of Myanmar workers, it was 7th May day. The May day was marked as a gazette holiday starting from that ceremony.¹ In this way, after independence, Myanmar firstly got the right to attend the 31st International Labour Organization's (ILO) Conference, held at Sanfransisco, USA in July, 1948.³

From the time of being slave under British, Myanmar were fighting against British for independence. They sacrificed their lives and wealth. But, they didn't succeed. The year 1300 revolution was relayed to unfinished Myanmar heroes' independence struggle. Due to the repercussion of that revolution, Dr. Ba Maw government was removed and U Pu's government got the authority complying with the workers' request. The year 1300 revolution was gradually loosened and finally came to an end. Therefore, Myanmar carried out the task to form the national air force and to organize the entire nation. Besides, as the national unity troop was essential for Myanmar against British, workers and peasant's class participated in that task actively with the sense of politics. Myanmar proposed Japan for foreign help as they knew that independence might be gained by fighting with weapons. So, the British were driven out with the cooperation of Burma Independent Army, BIA and Japan. But, the Japanese nullified their promise of Myanmar's independence. They adopted their fascism and Myanmar people were hushed to construct Thailand-Myanmar railway. The workers died in constructing that railway. The unbearable Myanmar people and workers fought against fascist. The Japanese destroyed factories, workshops and enterprises. The workers became jobless when the British returned to Myanmar after Japanese had surrendered.

Police strike and all kinds of government strike were supported by the organization of all classes of people under AFPFL. Workers from socialist and communist parties participated in those strikes. Nationwide general strike appeared in 1947 to give support to the independence struggle. The general strike appeared after the war was as important as the general strike in the year 1300 before the war broke out. Myanmar gained independence due to continuous struggle. The national people and workers simultaneously participated in the year 1300 revolution, in the strike of all government staff in 1946 and in nationwide general strike in 1947. The workers bravely participated in anti-British and national independence campaign accepting the leadership of national anti-fascist front army and league of people's independence.

Conclusion

After the British had conquered lower Myanmar, Myanmar transformed into a country which was governed by colonialism as well as feudalism. The British began to shape lower Myanmar by using imperialist economic system. Worker class appeared with imperialist economic characteristics such as extending farming to get profit, employing farmers from India who were necessary for farming and for planting industrial zones. After World War I, the people in Myanmar struggled to gain independence under British as other countries in the world. In 1920, while politicians, educated persons, students and monks were leading politics, workers formed labour organization known as labour union because of Imperialism and political suppress. In 1930s, workers' liberation movement changed into national liberation movement and into struggle for independence due to expansion in political views of socialism and communism led by Dobamar Asiayone in Myanmar. Workers movement became a form of fighting using strike as weapon. The most prominent movement was the Year 1300 Revolution, originated from workers strike in Chauk Oil Field.

Strike leaders look for the help of foreign countries to supply them with ammunition as they came to know that during the periods of pre and during World War II, national freedom and independence struggle could not be successful by using strike and getting rid of

fascism and gaining independence could be performed by armed revolution. In the days of Japanese, workers, peasants, students, monks and all the people in Myanmar united under anti-fascist league and fought Japanese with arms. Therefore, workers movement didn't appear separately at that time.

After World War II, all the workers in Myanmar united under the leadership of AFPFL when the British governed again in Myanmar. The workers were on strike again like the workers movement led by AFPFL. All staff strike and countrywide strike under the banner of AFPFL were strong enough to stop the entire British Administrative Machine. The workers movement after World War II was stronger and more united than those occurred in pre-war time. But workers' freedom fights led by political organizations and educated persons, happened together with independence struggle. It was found that organizations appeared separately for the repercussions on political views of political organizations. Therefore, the workers in Myanmar played an important role in fighting against colonial expansionists' manipulation with intense patriotism.

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Tin Tun Myint, Acting Rector and Dr. Si Si Hla Bu, Pro-Rector of Hinthada University, for their permission to work on this research. Daw Aye Aye Han, Professor and Head of History Department, Hinthada University, is gratefully acknowledged for her guidance. Special thanks are due to Daw Sandar Myint, Associate Professor of the History Department, Hinthada University for her help.

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