

As civil disobedience movement grows, so do efforts to shore up resistance

As civil servants stage walkouts in protest against military rule, new groups are forming to help them meet basic needs

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Public employees, including teachers, engineers, doctors and nurses, join a protest in Yangon's Sanchaung township on February 8 as part the civil disobedience movement. (Myanmar Now)

In the two weeks since Myanmar's military seized power, resistance has taken many forms, from people banging pots and pans to massive street protests. But none have shown more commitment to the cause of restoring civilian rule than the tens of thousands of civil servants who have put their lives and livelihoods on the line by joining the growing civil disobedience movement.

Some in this movement have been targeted for arrest, as the regime carries out late-night arrests around the country as part of its effort to crush popular opposition to its rule. But many others are struggling with a more basic problem: meeting their material needs as they forego an income in their bid to bring down the junta.

It is in recognition of this sacrifice that new groups have begun to crop up to assist public employees in need. These groups—with names like “We Support Heroes” and “2/21 Sturdy Hands”—are trying to ensure that the regime doesn’t win by attrition what it can’t achieve through fear and intimidation.

“Whenever we urge civil servants to stay away from work, there are always some who ask us how they can feed themselves. That’s why we formed this group, so that we could answer that question and show our unity,” said a member of a group that calls itself “Get Well Soon”.

Already, hundreds have sought help. So far, however, support has come mainly in the form of food and shelter provided by private donors, as financial aid is still not available due to the fact that none of the groups have begun fundraising yet.

One group, We Support Heroes, says that it has assisted at least 100 public employees and their families since the civil disobedience movement, or CDM, started in the days after the February 1 coup. Most are nurses, but others include customs officials, parliamentary office staff, and the households of six police officers forced to leave government-sponsored housing.

One of the members of the group told Myanmar Now that even without much cash at its disposal, it has been able to amply provide for those in need of assistance thanks to the generosity of the public.

“There are people who have welcomed others into their homes, in some cases giving them the whole house to live in. In Mandalay, a whole hotel was provided. And some are giving not just accommodation, but also daily meals,” he said.

Engineering resistance

Many of those walking off the job to join the CDM are technical staff working in a variety of ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and the Irrigation and the Small-Scale Industries

Department. Scattered around the country, from remote parts of Kachin State to the urban centers of Yangon and Mandalay, they have been among those in greatest need.

Civil Disobedience Campaign—Myanmar Engineers, a group formed to assist workers in technical professions who have lost their jobs or housing due to their participation in the CDM, says that it has received 600 requests for help, but has so far only been able to assist in about 200 cases.



Residents of Thingangyun township in Yangon block police as they attempt to force public employees participating the civil disobedience movement to resume work on February 15. (Myanmar Now)

Part of the problem, according to a member of the group, is that it cannot function openly and risks a crackdown if it starts receiving large amounts of money. At this stage, it relies mostly on remittances from supporters overseas, especially in Japan and the United States, but this has been insufficient due to the difficulty of transferring money from these countries.

But more than money, he said, groups like this need to be able to work without fear of prosecution. “We, as a supporting group, need the protection of lawyers, human rights experts, and politicians. Only then will we be able to support the anti-authoritarian movement openly and officially,” he said.

But funding will definitely be necessary going forward, he added.

“The CDM is the only silent weapon we have. To keep it going will need more than just verbal support—it will also take money. This revolution will succeed only if the people can provide security for those joining the CDM,” he said.

Joining hands

Some groups have not hesitated to step up their efforts to support the CDM, even at the risk of arrest. Led by prominent activists Nilar Thein (of the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society group) and singer Lin Lin, as well as Buddhist monk Sayadaw U Thu Mingalar, 2/21 Sturdy Hands said that it was in the process of setting up a fund to support unpaid civil servants.

In the meantime, the group said, donations can be made through the Free Funeral Service Society, a well-known charity led by actor Kyaw Thu and his wife, Shwe Zi Thet.

A number of famous personalities in Myanmar have thrown their support behind the CDM. Movie actresses Phwe Phwe and Aye Wat Yi Thaung, actors Zenn Kyi and Paing Takhon, director Na Gyi, and badminton champion Thet Htar Thuzar are among those who have used their names to promote the cause.



Public employees, including teachers, engineers, doctors and nurses, join a protest in Yangon's Sanchaung township on February 8 as part the civil disobedience movement. (Myanmar Now)

But while the backing of celebrities has certainly helped to reinforce the idea that this is a broad-based movement uniting the entire country against military rule, it has been the energy and efforts of ordinary people that have made the greatest difference.

“Our greatest weapon is the strong desire of the people. No other weapons are necessary. You don’t have to do anything if you join the CDM, which we believe will make the change that we want come true,” said a member of the Get Well Soon group, which also supports patients affected by strikes by hospital staff.

The movement has already attracted the support of a wide range of public employees, including teachers, healthcare professionals, customs officers, forestry and railway workers, and the staff of state-run banks, and continues to grow.

But as the military moves tanks into cities in a show of its determination to quell resistance and crackdowns grow increasingly brutal, it is still far from clear if the will of the people will prevail in what may turn into a bloody battle for control of a country weary of decades of dictatorship.