



## **Interview with Veteran Activist U Hla Shwe**

**Lin Nyein Eain**

### **Abstract**

In this interview, Lin Nyein Eain, the pseudonym of an organizer of the 2016 workshop on student activism held in Yangon, interviews U Hla Shwe, a veteran activist and student agitator, who served as a member of the secretariat of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) and editor of *Oway* magazine. U Hla Shwe was involved in the 1962 student uprising and also fought for the Communist Party of Burma for nearly a decade. He ended up spending close to two decades in prison. He passed away during the COVID-19 Delta wave of 2021 due to a lack of supplementary oxygen. In this interview he goes into deep detail about the procedures of various student unions and the relationships between unions, university councils and other bodies in the 1948-1962 post-independence period.

### **Could you please introduce your experience in student politics, and the aspiration, vision, and representativeness of student unions in Burma?**

I first began engaging in student union activities in 1951. I started out as a student leader in 1953, when I was in the seventh grade, and I was involved for ten years, up until 1963. The Bogyalay Township Student Union was my first appointment.

During the British rule, there were only two unions: the All Burma Students' Union (ABSU), which became the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) in 1951, and the University Student Union, which became the Rangoon University Student Union (RUSU), founded on 31 January 1931. The ABFSU is the country's largest national student union. Thakin Ba Hein, Dr. Hla Shwe, Ko Aye Kyaw, and Ko Thein Aung were among the student leaders that founded the ABFSU on 25 February 1936 under its original title, the ABSU. Before the country's independence

from colonial rule, its organizational structure was limited, but more latitude was granted for activities following independence, and the ABSU functioned more efficiently than previous student unions since it had national reach. For instance, student opinion was critical when discussing ending civil war. Despite occasional disputes with the government under the incumbent Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) administration, no significant conflicts occurred when organizing student movements, regardless of public opinion or powerful political groups, in government or in opposition. The government's connection with students in the post-independence democratic period was different from today.

We student union members held talks with former student leaders, including Dr. Than Tun, Dr. Maung Maung Kyaw, and U Soe Thein, to discuss how to alter the function of student unions based on their political influence, the country's political background, and the scope of their operations. We then spoke to former student leaders like Dr. Than Tun and other former student leaders who were still alive at the time and with whom we could openly communicate.

The ABFSU held regular conferences every four years. Extraordinary meetings were also held; for example, when major events occurred, the ABFSU could call for an emergency meeting. The executive committee of the ABFSU did not make all the decisions. At least one provincial or university/college student union was negotiated with by the committee when solving issues. After independence, these student unions remained the same. There were concerns with the foundations of the ABFSU in the post-independence era since it elected its congress and executive council every four years, leaving a lot of time between elections.

As for the RUSU, it organized events, dealt with student problems, rights and general education issues. It also dealt with political affairs related to students. According to its constitution, the RUSU organized elections once a year, regardless of who won or lost. The academic year began on 1 June in those

days. When it began, the processes for holding the election and business meetings were the first tasks to be completed.

The RUSU was comprised of 11 executive council members. In the first phase of the election, the positions of president, vice president, and treasury officer were elected. All students were eligible for these roles, including the president and vice president. The treasury role, however, was only open to graduates. Joining RUSU did not require any active steps by the students. When a student enrolled at the university, they filled out a form and instantly joined the RUSU, making them eligible to be elected and to vote. Out of the entire university student body of 10,000 in those days, around 6,000 to 7,000 were interested in the student union's activities and progress.

A business meeting was conducted before the election, open to all students. At that event, the previous batch of student union members from the last academic year reported on their activities and successes during their tenure. The date of the business meeting had to be announced at least two weeks prior to the event, at Rangoon University, Htee Tan College and Yankin College. The first agenda of the conference was to present a report on the activities of the student unions in the previous year and to ask whether students agree with the actions of the executive members. The student population voted to decide any disagreements. If most students voted that there had been an abuse or disagreed with a major measure by the council, the executive council member responsible would be dismissed. If the entire council was voted out, the executive council's election officers would be responsible for planning the next election without the assistance of the council.

In those days, the whole of the executive council was seldom dissolved at once, as the council tried its best to avoid it. Students who attended the union business meeting debated various topics, posed questions and requested explanations for actions taken. The debate was always conducted in a civilized manner, with no use of violence. If the whole executive council was sacked, its individual members would be unable to run in the next election. At the business meeting, seven new election

officers had to be elected, with the current members of the executive council in control of the process.

An announcement for the forthcoming election would be made if no objections were raised during the business meeting. The present executive council would then organize the election alongside the election officers. Candidates had to complete the necessary paperwork and the election was conducted according to regulations. The first round of the election was for the positions of president, vice president, and treasurer, while the second phase elected six executive council members, one for each portfolio or function. The treasurer position in the RUSU executive council was usually held by a female, as people believed that females are more considerate regarding finances. If no one ran for a particular position, an announcement would be made, and the current council would appoint a new member in lieu of an elected candidate. The executive council would have nine total members after these two elections. The executive council would then appoint two more members themselves, who would take up the roles of editor of *Oway* magazine and librarian at the University Library. The new eleven-member executive council would then hold its first meeting to discuss the coming year.

Back then, every university student had to pay laboratory costs, library fees, and a student union subscription of one Burmese Kyat. The student union treasurer and the Rangoon University financial department collaborated to manage finances and accounts according to the rules. To withdraw funds, one had to fill out paperwork and provide their student registration number, dormitory, and union position. Funds needed for students' health, educational activities, and welfare were taken from the university accountants: withdrawals had to be recorded in the credit and debit ledger, and the RUSU president and treasurer, as well as the university's chief accountant, all had to sign the log. The RUSU was required to hold accountable elections, business meetings, and to manage finances according to protocol.

If the RUSU wanted to organize additional events and campaigns outside the basic budget provided by member fees, it had

to raise funds independently. In practice this meant that, because the student union had so many concerns to deal with, external funding was always needed. Executive council members would individually ask donors for funding on behalf of the union. One example of such a business donor was U Pwint Kaung, the owner of Pwint Kaung Fish Paste and Sauce Enterprise. An example of an artist was singer Myat Lay.

The fundraising did not have to come only from individuals in this way. The union always tried to raise as much money as possible. Every two years, a festival was held, and extra effort was made to cover the festival expenses. Occasionally there were no major events at all during the year, so there was minimal expenditure. If the present members of the executive council wanted to run for re-election, they had to raise their own funds for their campaign expenditures. Executive council members were prohibited from using union funds for campaigning.

If there were excess funds left over at the end of an executive council's term, they had to declare it in the financial statement provided to members. Two government-recognized chartered accountants had to sign the financial information. The financial statement of the student union had to be confirmed as being lawful, following best practices and free from fraud. If the registered accountants did not approve the financial statement, the executive council members would be dismissed at the union business meeting.

In comparison to the pre-independence era of Ko Aung San, unions received more funds post-independence. The RUSU extended its operations and constitution. In the constitution of the RUSU, the editor of *Oway* and librarian are a part of the student union. The librarian had to take the initiative in forming a library committee and reporting the library committee's members to the executive council. They also had to be made public when verified. The names of council members, as well as their functions, such as *Oway* editor, librarians, and other members, had to be documented and announced to students, like a government would to its citizens.



The British deliberately taught us Burmese to be systematic, work according to rules and regulations, and accustomed us to institutional boundaries, rules, and regulations. They did an excellent job at it. By example, let's say the credit for the student union was 150,000 Burmese Kyat and was appropriately registered. Any credits from other sources, such as individual donor funding, had to be documented in the credit and debit ledger. Everything had to be invoiced and carried out in a systematic way. The procedures of the student union were like a miniature version of parliament. Experience in student unions prepared some of us for joining political parties. We could manage public services well even after independence.

### **How were networking activities conducted between student unions, such as between the ABFSU and the RUSU?**

There were rules and regulations for networking in the constitution of ABFSU. There was a paragraph in the bylaw. For example, the executive council members of the Mandalay University Student Union (MUSU) had to be registered as members in the ABFSU according to obligatory rules and regulations. This extended to all universities and college wanting to be recognized by the ABFSU and participate in its conferences. The constitutions of student unions are linked. Each regional, provincial and college/university student union had to register with the ABFSU. The ABFSU in turn was registered with the International Union of Students (IUS), headquartered in the Czech Republic. While ABFSU conferences were held only every four years during the October holidays, the executive board could hold additional emergency meetings if they deemed it necessary. Representatives from many universities and colleges such as those in Patheingyi, Myittha, and Mawlamyine attended the seminars. There were also conferences led by the most prominent student unions, such as the RUSU and MUSU. All these were already denoted in the constitution of student unions.

## **During your time in student politics, how did university councils work with the student unions and student body?**

I can discuss the Rangoon University Council (RUC). All the university professors were members. The RUSU also had the right to appoint two members to the RUC to represent the student union. For example, Dr. Maung Maung Kyaw and Mr. Ti Koh Haung, both well-known government-recognized lawyers, were chosen by the RUSU to represent them at the RUC. When student-related issues were raised in the RUC, these appointed representatives had to defend, question, and provide resolutions on behalf of the students. If an issue was raised that related to a student studying a particular subject, such as physics, the corresponding professor RUC member was held accountable in the discussion. Professors discussed academic matters such as failing examinations, giving awards, and qualifying for honors classes at the RUC. The Prime Minister of the Union of Burma was the RUC chairman, while the university rector was deputy chairman. Although Rangoon University had autonomous status, in practice the RUC was under the elected government.

A representative of the Prime Minister was assigned as he could not attend the council personally. There were also two representatives from each of the upper and lower houses of parliament assigned to the RUC. They facilitated cooperation between the RUC and government, enacting laws and financial regulations when cases were put forward by the RUC. The university required the approval of parliament to access its funding. The RUC had to report its expenditure to the university council administrative board to get the council's approval, although the funding was from the students at the university. Not all spending needed to be reported. The RUC also had the right to expel students. When emergency events such as the 7 July 1962 student protests were discussed by the RUC, then-leader General Ne Win eliminated the two RUSU representatives from the university council, resulting in the loss of voice for students.



There was also a body called the Social and Reading Club (SRC) under the RUSU. There were dormitory committees, with a warden and an SRC for each. These SRCs organized events like dinners and social gatherings as well as raising funds. The report of dormitory wardens and opinions of the SRCs were required when the RUC expelled a student. If the warden reported an incident of rule breaking, the dormitory committee would expel the student from the dormitory. If the rule breaking was worthy of full dismissal, the RUC could decide to expel or protect the student.

**As someone who led student activities, how do you view the term ‘student’ as a global symbol and how do Burmese student unions compare internationally?**

There are student unions all over the world. Representatives of student unions from universities and colleges in places such as the People’s Republic of China, Japan, Germany, and the Czech Republic used to visit us. While our own student union constitutions might be the same or sometimes different, in my opinion, the difference was not too big. We once had a visitor from Iraq. He explained the constitution of the student union he represented in his country, and we presented the RUSU Constitution to him. There were a few differences, as our constitution had been drawn up by elite British professors and other highly qualified individuals who had visited other countries and gained international experience. They applied the knowledge that was suitable for the context in Burma and discarded that which was not appropriate.

The role of ABFSU should be mentioned here. All the issues related to the RUSU were managed by its executive council. However, RUSU is also a registered member of ABFSU. The biennial seminar of all the universities and colleges did not happen during British rule. This biennial seminar started only during the post-independence period and was regularly organized by the ABFSU. Also, when the ABFSU held its conference every four

years, student union representatives from all the nation's universities and colleges attended the conference.

It is necessary to have a union that can represent all the universities and colleges and host conferences in which all institutions participate. The ABFSU took the role during our time, and it should have continued in that way. If there are 100 or 200 student unions in Burma, all these institutions should link to the ABFSU. Then, all national student unions of other countries should join the IUS. The student unions of Burma, Japan, and China were all members of the IUS. The IUS would sometimes hold continental conferences. For example, if the IUS conference is held in Africa, the ABFSU could participate at their invitation. In 1958, the IUS conference was held in China, and we sent 60-70 representatives. The U Nu government used to allow many student representatives to attend IUS conferences. Students from ethnic communities were also represented, with two representatives from each ethnic group.

### **Were any student leagues or unions related to particular ethnic groups back then?**

Yes, but they did not take the name of 'student union'. Instead, they used the term 'student association': the Chin Student Association, Mon Student Association, Pa-O Student Association and Shan Student Association. This was similar to the regional student associations like the Pyapon Province Association, Bogalay Township Association, Taungoo Province Association, and Patheingyi Province Association. In 1960, when I was a member of the executive council in both the RUSU and ABFSU, I solicited the opinion of former student leaders like Dr. Maung Maung Kyaw about founding a league for Rangoon University Ethnic Students. They approved of the idea and such a league came into existence. We RUSU leaders invited two representatives from each association to establish the league at that time. We coordinated with the league to solve issues together as they arose. For instance, we officially informed the league that we would be

demonstrating on a certain day and requested them to discuss the issue in their own executive council meeting.

Here, I would like to mention the relations between ethnic students and the RUSU. Student activists from ethnic minority backgrounds also participated in the RUSU executive council elections. Ko Aung Win, a Shan student, is an example. When he and I went to Htee Tan College together, before I attended Rangoon University, he was the president, and I was the secretary of the Htee Tan College Student Union. Later, the political significance of each ethnic group played an instrumental role in student politics.

We also encouraged the participation of some influential ethnic students in the league to coordinate with other institutions and to raise the voices of ethnic students. With such kinds of institutions, we could create a political link when there were important issues to discuss, like the Panglong Agreement. The ABFSU also facilitated meetings between the Internal Peace Committee and ethnic students. Peace within the union was a shared issue relevant to all ethnic groups. All the ethnic groups within the Shan States, for example, were united under the Shan Student Association. At this time, some wanted to organize more granular associations, but they only had very small minority populations. It is noteworthy that ethnic representation only catches on when there are ethnic-related issues.

### **Did student unions collaborate with other civil and political organizations in your time?**

Many student groups run for student union election, and some distinguished groups are referred to as “forces”. My fellow leaders and I formed a group called the Student Unity Front in 1955. I also joined the Rangoon Students Progressive Force (RSPF), which was formed before independence. Not many students were interested in it. You would only join if you were interested in progressive politics. The organization was intended to study Marxism, with the label “progressive” meant to signal this, and its informal title was the Rangoon University Marxism Study

Group. It was not an SRC, but SRC members did join it. Politics during this time was open and flexible. The government allowed the studying, publishing, and distributing of Marxist literature. In 1953 the ruling government formed an organization called the Democratic Students Organization (DSO), with U Kyaw Nyein, the famous anti-colonial politician, playing a significant role in organizing it. There were many groups formed for students with similar interests at that time.

In 1953, incumbent politicians U Nu, U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein reduced the October university holidays from one month to 15 days, displaying dishonest intentions. Disputes took place. The DSO supported the decision while progressive student forces opposed it. Progressive students were more influential at the time as they were executive council members of the RUSU and ABFSU and held the positions of president and secretary in dormitory committees. When a student strike erupted in October that year, many students were expelled, and many others were arrested and sentenced to jail.

The clashes between student protesters and the police were intense, with the police using tear gas and live rounds to shoot students. This was one of the earliest public protests after independence. I was only in seventh or eighth grade when these protests happened. Later, when I became a student leader at Rangoon University, Ko Win Maung Than also became a leader at Mandalay University. He was a follower of *Thakin* Soe, the Red Flag communist party leader.

We can say there was democracy in general back then. During 1959-60, when we became university students, there was another organization called the Rangoon University Student Unity Front (RUSUF), which was unrelated to the RSPF. The RUSUF was formed to promote unity among students. After its formation, the government supported 'Ye Gaung' students to compete against it. The original Ye Gaung students were a group of students who wanted to fight against the Japanese during the Japanese occupation. U Kyaw Nyein gathered some students to compete against the RUSUF and revived the name Ye Gaung. These Ye Gaung students were government supporters.

Both the Ye Gaung and RUSUF students competed in the 1960 RUSU executive council election. As part of the RUSUF, I remember hiring cars and Willys jeeps for the election day. The rental fee was like 20 Kyat per day. We used these cars to campaign to students in Yankin, Htee Tan, and the medical technology compound.

The Ye Gaung students were defeated in 1960, an outcome not helped by the fact that the election committee downplayed or outright withheld individual candidates' group affiliations. Candidates who chose to compete in the RUSU election could do so individually or formally aligned with an organization. If a candidate ran as a representative of an organization, the affiliation was not mentioned in any public election materials. The election committee only announced the number of candidates, and personal details such as name, specialized subject, dormitory, and residing address. The candidates themselves were required to campaign under and for their groups and try to create a memorable impression.

For the 1960 RUSU executive council election, the ballot box was placed in Judson Hall of Rangoon University. Students could vote freely and democratically. University lecturers managed giving out the ballots, supervising the polling place and listing the voters. There was a student register book and identification cards for every student. Two lecturers at the entrance to Judson Hall verified the registration number of every arriving student and gave out ballots. The voter had to tick off their unpreferred candidates, displayed on the ballot without their group affiliations. The votes were counted at night in the convocation hall. The counting tables were in the hall while the two blackboards were placed outside. The lecturers counted the ballots in front of some students in the hall. The names of candidates were written on the blackboard, and the number of votes were shown beside the name. A tally was kept for every ten votes.

To divide the RUSUF and Ye Gaung students who gathered outside the hall in front of the blackboards, the students tied a long rope from a lamppost in front of the convocation hall to a tree in front of the student union building. This led to an

enjoyable atmosphere without any violence. The winning group could celebrate their victory freely by dancing. There were two charming female candidates running under the Ye Gaung students, Ma Sein Aye and Ma Khin Hnin Yee, who had won positions in the Miss Burma Beauty Pageant. We thought students would vote for them, but they proved us wrong, and the two ladies got the least number of votes. The RUSUF won the most votes. There was no split in the RUSU executive council.

Before the 7 July 1962 student uprising, there were several different student groups that vied for influence in the RUSU and therefore the ABFSU. The DSO and Ye Gaung students generally sided with the government and were in fact created by the government. The government wanted supporters in the student body to back them, as most students tended to criticize their actions. But they were unsuccessful at influencing the student unions. The 1959-60 student union election, the third I directly participated in, turned out to be the last ever RUSU election held at Rangoon University.

### **Was there any collaboration between university student unions and other student unions?**

The ABFSU organized biannual seminars for union representatives from the nation's universities and colleges. The seminars rotated between different cities. These seminars were important and featured discussions on crucial issues such as education policy, public expenditure on education, passing rates for exams, curriculum, general academic issues and students' rights. There were high-level discussions and academic papers presented. The ABFSU was responsible and accountable for overall union policy, which involved a lot of research. The union invited parliament representatives from the National United Front and academic experts such as Dr. Maung Maung Kyaw to attend the seminars. These education experts assisted union members to adopt firm positions on pressing issues. For example, there was an idea of omitting English subjects in tenth grade, but after research and discussion the union decided that skipping English subjects



would only cause obstacles for students' further study. Some lecturers preferred English in general, while others preferred Burmese as the teaching medium. (I think it is better to teach in English. But students from rural areas who do not have strong English skills then face more learning difficulties.)

In addition to the biannual seminars, the ABFSU also held a conference on education every four years. The issues discussed there related to high school rather than university, and included education expenditure, the relevance (or not) of unions to high school students, student arrests, accommodation, teachers, the outdated examination system, and the curriculum.

Sometimes, the high school conference and university seminar overlapped in the same year. At that time, an extra session was added to discuss further issues. For example, if the ABFSU conference was held for five days as usual, then one extra day was added to discuss special issues such as forcing the students to repeat from grade nine if they failed the matriculation examination and such a policy's consequences on students. In general, the issues at university level and high school level are dissimilar. The university level is more complicated due to the dormitories, exam system, and different prescribed subjects, with serious issues such as the lack of accommodation and lecturers, and the university's inability to publish and deliver textbooks on time.

The ABFSU conference extended its invitations to all members. Township-level student unions could send only one representative and one observer, while province-level student unions could send two representatives and two observers. University and college student unions sent their representatives as needed after negotiation. There were logistic and accommodation problems given the large numbers of attendees. Funds were insufficient, although there were abundant materials. The leaders of the ABFSU had financial struggles. Each seminar would be organized by a student union from the host city and nearby (for example, if the host city was Mandalay, MUSU would be primarily responsible for organizing the event). The ABFSU did not have

any extra resources for funding, although its executive council had to travel often.

In 1958, the first student conference to discuss contemporary issues related to high school education was held in the Convocation Hall of Rangoon University. The convocation hall was decorated beautifully, and even the chairs were set up in an oval shape like the United Nations conferences. The conference focused on national high school education. Problems such as the examination system, curriculum, textbooks, and founding student unions were discussed, and there were talks from experts. The conference focused on high schoolers from grade 8 to grade 10.

### **Now it is 2016. Has the scope and nature of student activities altered due to the current government's policies and actions?**

I would like to say something about how party politics worked in the unions back in the old days. Let's say you follow Marxism: that is your choice. Differences in political ideology are up to the individual. It did not matter if you supported U Nu back then, or Aung San Suu Kyi now. The student union, as an organization, would never make any comment about it or persuade others to support or oppose someone. The ABFSU mainly focused on discussing education policy. Supporting or opposing politicians was not relevant. The ABFSU did not give any opinion. We used to discuss issues related to the whole educational system in the university and college seminars, whether the government is democratic or not. As a senior student union member, I commented on the government's practices of democracy, the strengths and weaknesses of educational policy, and government expenditure on education.

I believe that even high schoolers can participate in politics. It is essential for study at the university and college levels. U Nu once instructed that student unions should be off campus, although he was a student union leader on campus during his college days. The ABFSU argued with U Nu, and later, he agreed to

compromise. Now in 2016, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi should not comment on student unions. If she makes any comment, it is inevitable that we will respond. But we do not want to make any comment. For example, if students wish to operate a union office, they should be allowed; it is only democratic. If only supporters of The Lady are allowed to organize a student union, then she should return her Nobel Prize. Why would she refuse students operating their own unions? A student following Marxism can still be a student leader. They can believe in whatever they want. For example, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said, “let bygones be bygones, people should not talk about the 7 July 1962 uprising, it only increases tension with the military”. If so, what would she say about stopping celebrating Martyrs’ Day?

All that aside, we cannot simply comment on The Lady from a single perspective. Instead, we should analyze her actions from various angles, as she is currently the leader of the country. We should not make loose comments, but The Lady should also refrain from commenting in the same way.

### **How did relations with other countries and political leaders’ impact on the student unions when you were a student leader?**

I already mentioned the ABFSU was a member of the IUS, headquartered in the Czech Republic. We had a Burmese student union member living in the Czech Republic as our representative. We communicated with him through many channels, sometimes through the Chinese Embassy, sometimes through the British Embassy, and sometimes through volunteers. There was another international student union too, the International Student Conference and its coordinating secretariat, which supported US foreign policy and was not as anti-imperialist and Marxist as the IUS, although there were both leftists and rightists in the IUS.

The ABFSU student leaders mostly followed Marxism. In Japan, there were the *zengakuren*,<sup>1</sup> who were tougher than us. They visited us once and asked if we were afraid. We said, “please do not ask like that, my friend. We do not feel afraid, as people’s movements should be peaceful and democratic”. We also politely said to them that they are a bit too harsh. We communicated through translators. Japanese people are a little too active and hot. Every cultural group in the world has its own significant characteristics. Just because China was a leftist country at the time, it cannot be assumed that there was no Kuomintang student union. Some leftist countries allow rightist activities; likewise, some rightist countries tolerate Red Flag parties. It depends on whether a country is politically and socially mature. Our country and our government were not mature. I said this to U Nu, and he laughed. I visited him with two friends. U Nu is very democratic. When we arrived at his place, his clerk, who arranged his meals, told us to wait because the Prime Minister was eating. A moment later, U Nu himself told us, “Maung Hla Shwe and Maung Thet, please kindly wait while I am eating”. The Prime Minister, of such a high rank, did not need to ask us visitors to “please wait for me”. We felt so awkward. We replied, “Uncle, please eat comfortably. We can wait”. U Nu treated us very well like that. We may not have liked his politics, but we did not hate him personally.

However, U Kyaw Nyein never welcomed us once in his lifetime. He was actively against communism. Not all of our student leaders were communists, and people knew that. Even the US Embassy treated us better than U Kyaw Nyein. They just asked us if we were reds (i.e. communists) and were very cultured and

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<sup>1</sup> The *zengakuren* is a radical student movement that emerged in Japan in the late 1940s in response to the conservative establishment and U.S. imperialism. It became known for its militant tactics, such as direct action, street demonstrations, and demands for greater democracy, student rights, and social justice. However, the movement faced numerous challenges, including government repression, internal divisions, and the changing political climate of Japan in the 1980s, which led to its eventual decline. For more information, see Dowsey, 2012.

polite. They laughed when we said we were neither red nor blue. They were very diplomatic and sometimes they made jokes. I never heard about human rights at that time. They told us it was fine even if we did not like the U.S. and if they did not like us. They were talking about the same human rights we are discussing nowadays. While U Kyaw Nyein never treated us respectfully, we did not respond to him rudely, as he was one of the leaders of our country and the Minister of Home Affairs. We were instructed by our seniors to never disrespect him.

### **In which key political struggles did you and the ABFSU play a role in?**

One area that we focused on was the internal peace process, which was a common issue related to the entire country. We focused on opposing civil war and the peacebuilding process. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing was the chairman and lawyer U Tun Tin was the secretary of the Internal Peace Committee. Another area the unions worked on in my time was the education system in general. We tried to replace it with a modern education system. We did not have the expertise to do this on our own, but we knew that education should result in higher career prospects. At that time to receive a degree a student had to study for 14 years: ten years in primary and secondary education and four years in higher education. If a degree cannot guarantee a decent livelihood, if you cannot make a respectable income for your family after 14 years of study, it's just not worth it.

The education system of Burma was basically in chaos at the time I was in student politics and then after. We could not build a successful career out of our education. We struggled to apply the knowledge we acquired from our education. Hence, we actively participated in opposing the matriculation examination system, which was essential for high school.

In 1960, there was a demonstration against the matriculation examination system. At that time, it was too hard to pass the matriculation exam. Teachers in rural areas could not help us pass the exam as they struggled to teach English, Geometry

and Algebra subjects. When the results of matriculation exams were announced at that time, the pass rate was only around 2.1 percent. Students who failed had to repeat from ninth grade. Eighth grade was called pre-matric. So, the student who failed the matriculation examination had to repeat a whole year of study.

The demonstrations against the matriculation exam standards took place all over the country. As ABFSU executive council members, we were busy traveling to different colleges and provinces. Prime Minister U Nu refused to change the matriculation standards and results despite the demonstrations. Instead, he announced a supplementary result for students who scored close to the passing mark. The ABFSU told U Nu that it was difficult for students to repeat a whole year of study, especially for students from lower socioeconomic areas, which was most students. U Nu did not compromise, even though he said he felt empathy for the students, he claimed to worry that people would be unimpressed with the quality of the Burmese education system if the exam standards were lowered. There were some disputes between teachers and students who were given a pass in the supplementary results. Teachers hurled verbal insults at students who felt disrespected, and this sometimes led to physical violence. The ABFSU agitated for all student leaders to gather on Sule Pagoda Road, where the Shangri-La Hotel is standing today. More than 100 students, including students from the Htee Tan and Yankin colleges, gathered for a 72-hour hunger strike.

In addition to the hunger strike, we at the ABFSU took additional actions such as meeting with stakeholders, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Education to try and solve the issue. During British rule, students who passed seventh grade could be assigned as an administrative assistant in an office. However, we could not do the same because of a lack of English language skills. A seventh grader would have been fluent in English during the British time, when the student population was few. At the current time in 2016, the number of graduates is enormous, and not enough jobs have been created.



## **Could you tell us a bit more about your personal experience after you entered the workforce and what happened to you after 1962?**

In fact, my parents were lower-class people and could not afford my university tuition fees. Student leaders such as Ko Ba Swe Lay, Ko Thet, Ko Tin Tun, Ko Min Kyaw, and Min Hla Nyunt Kyuu pleaded with the ABFSU to sponsor my tuition fees. Later, I was offered 150 Kyat as a monthly salary to teach seventh grade in a private school, founded by a writer named Min Kyaw and a student leader named Min Hla Nyunt Kyuu, and located near the Kamayut guard house. I usually gave 90 Kyat of my salary to my family and enjoyed the rest.

Later, I became a history teacher, teaching middle school students, eighth and tenth grade, after choosing history as my specialized subject. There was a university subject called Triple History, which was Asian, Western and Burmese history. Students interested in arts and politics studied these Triple History subjects. The history of Burma, Japan and China were also studied separately. Triple History exams included three questions that had to be answered in a single article. It was hard to pass the tests without studying hard. I passed them and earned the right to become a history teacher.

Soon I was invited to become the headmaster of a male-only private school donated by the Tiger Balm Philanthropic Organization and located on Kamayut Railway Station Street. There was a monk called Sayadaw Ashin Nyanissara who did philanthropic tasks with the organization. I agreed to work there for a better salary. I really tried to support my children and family with my small income. My wife and I worked as senior assistant teachers and we struggled to get by. My wife, brother-in-law and I were among the school's first-generation teachers.

At that time some private schools paid teachers up to 400 Kyats per month, whereas high school teachers in government schools earned around 300 Kyats. This was still a good salary. A tical of gold cost 300 Kyats. There were other incentives given to teachers too. But when General Ne Win put all the private

schools under public ownership after 1962, all private school teachers were reassigned to public schools. I became a teacher instead of being reassigned as a headmaster because I did not have a degree in education. Attending at least a one-year Diploma at the University of Education is mandatory to get a headmaster position in a public school. The Sayadaw offered to support me with school funding to get the diploma, so I ended up a headmaster again later, while my wife and brother-in-law were assigned as high school and middle school teachers, respectively. Our financial position was OK. Later, when the union peace talks failed, the military government attempted to arrest student leaders. I still held positions at the RUSU and ABFSU. I only had two options: to go underground or to be detained by Brigadier General Tin Oo, the Intelligence Chief. If I chose to rebel, I would have to leave my wife and children. If I was arrested, I might be killed in prison. There was a lot of news about Tin Oo having students killed in jail. But I felt like I was left with no choice. I had to rebel. When I went underground, I left my wife and two sons, young boys, around 5-6 years of age.

So many student leaders, including from the Mawlamyine, Kyaukpyu, Pathein, Mandalay, and Magway student unions, totaling over 70 people, went underground and became rebels. Some died in the Bago mountain range. Some went to Shan State and died there. Others died in battle in Rakhine State. I fought in two operations in the Ayeyarwady Division: Shwe Lin Yone and Shwe La Win. During the Shwe La Win operation, I was arrested and sent to Myaungmya Intelligence Unit 4. I was interrogated in brutal ways. We were in the Rangoon underground unit. So, the intelligence unit from Rangoon informed the Myaungmya unit that I, Hla Shwe (a.k.a) Aung Thar, must be sent to Rangoon.

Before I got there however, I was sent to Myitkyina to be brutally interrogated. Brigadier General Tin Oo was notorious for torturing and killing students. People captured on the battlefield were not tortured that intensely but were instead pushed to attend a 'press conference'. I said to my captors:

*You can sentence me to jail or do whatever you want. I could have died during that battle, and I now regret surviving. I am in your hands. You can kill me or keep me alive. I won't do a press conference and betray my comrades.*

The idea behind holding a press conference was to accuse and condemn the Communist Party, of whom I was a member. But we are comrades who protect each other. I told myself in my mind that I simply should have died in the battle.

When my wife, Khin Mar Aye, was taken to Yay Kyi Ai Interrogation Center, she also said I should have died. She was a Pa-O Student Association member. Kun Thet Lwin was the secretary of the Rangoon University Pa-O Student Association, while my wife was the associate secretary of the same organization. Captain Tin Aung from military intelligence told my wife, “Teacher, we tried to help him as much as possible, but your husband refused to cooperate”. My wife understood what he meant.

At that time, one or two student leaders, with whom I was familiar, surrendered and did the press conference; later, I tried negotiating with Bo Ni, Deputy Chief under Brigadier General Tin Oo. I told him that I was ready to face anything, and I could do a press conference, but I would not criticize my comrades. I would not alter my words later. Many people sacrificed their lives. Our leaders, Ko Tin Tun and Ko Thet, died in the Bago mountains. These people were like my brothers, and I refused to blame them in death.

“You can detain, release, or give me a death sentence, as you wish.”

That is why they detained me in prison. After six months in jail, Kun Thet Lwin came to see me. I scolded him and told him I did not want to see his face. Kun Thet Lwin told my wife Khin Mar Aye about that. My wife told him, “My husband cursed you because he was captured in the battle, but you surrendered to the army. So, he will stand his ground. As for me, I want to see my husband, but I will not welcome him if he surrenders”.

I told Captain Tin Aung this too, but he did not tell me my wife's reply. He tried to persuade me by talking about my sons. I said:

*Stop trying to convince me. I don't know how many battles you fought, but I fought at least some that I can be proud of. I fought bayonet-to-bayonet. You are also a soldier, so you should know the mindset of a soldier.*

In prison, they gave me food fit for an officer. Meat and side dishes were provided. After being detained for three months, they told me to pack my things and released me from prison. Although I packed my things, I really did not expect to go home. I did not even know where my home was.

I used to live in Shauk Pin Chan, Hledan Township. In the early years of our marriage, our house was at the back of Bwe Gyi's House. Ko Min Kyaw's son, Bwe Gyi (a.k.a. Ant Bwe Kyaw), was our neighbor. The U Chit Teashop originally opened near Hledan Market, and we used to go there at night. I was the youngest person in my group of contemporaries and learned a lot from these comrades. Anyway, I decided not to reveal anything if they released me or not. There was no difference. If I told anyone anything, I would not dare to look at my own face in the mirror, and I would not have the gall to face my comrades. Many people who fought together with me were dead. Many of my comrades were sent to Coco Island, including one comrade who was arrested together with me. I fought with these comrades. I had to keep silent even if I was tempted to reveal our secrets. I know what it is like to surrender. Many of my friends did so and cut ties with me. It was unpleasant that they did so even for me, who was captured in the battle, and did not surrender.

### **Looking back, what were the major tasks of the student union during your tenure?**

There were two significant tasks during my tenure as student leader. The first was furthering anti-colonialism and working on

our own peace process. The struggle against colonialism has been waged since the time of Ko Aung San and Ko Aung Kyaw. The US was creating chaos in Southeast Asia and a huge conflict between the US and China was occurring in the Indochina region. We followed Sayagyi Thakin Kodaw Hmaing and General Kyaw Zaw and tried to end our own civil war and achieve internal peace. This was related to democratization, issues related to democratic rights.

The second major was fixing the Burmese education system, which did not benefit graduates as it should at that time. Students from lower socioeconomic areas faced many obstacles to passing the matriculation exam. As an ex-insurgent, I know more than others about the suffering and woes of people in disadvantaged areas and areas affected by conflict. I lived for ten years in rural farmers' homes. If a house offered us rice with fermented fish paste and chilies, the family was doing well. I have been to homes that could offer only rice.

We organized a conference in 1958 to call for education reform, and approximately 700 student union members and other representatives attended the conference. We held the conference inside a compound, which was formerly the office of the prime minister and next to the University of Education today. Around 700 representatives attended the conference. U Nu served a buffet and a dinner party for the attendees. Fourteen policy papers were submitted at the conference to be put together as a single file. At the conference, Ko Zaw Win, then president of the ABFSU, and Ko Soe Thein, the president of the conference, delivered speeches. At the dinner hosted by U Nu, we handed the policy papers to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Education at the conference. These policy papers were conducted by scholars, and experts such as *Thakin* Khin Aung. The papers included suggestions and recommendations for reforming the education system of Burma. The topics were basic education (primary, middle, and high school) and university education (both arts and science).

I handed the papers over and said we hope they will be of some help when you implement education reform. After

officially handing the papers over, U Nu asked if we requested anything. I said travel expenses for the student representatives because we could not raise enough funds. U Nu agreed to pay the travel cost of the student representatives. U Nu said to me:

*We have been criticizing and opposing each other all the time. I even had to arrest and then release some students. I am happy to meet you. It reminds me of being a student leader in the past.*

Even so, none of the policy reforms we presented were implemented, and after the 7 July 1962 protests, we politically active students became rebels. Our options were to die in Yay Kyi Ai Interrogation Center, the jungle, or in prison. Most student leaders were killed in the fighting following these 1962 protests.

Approximately ten student leaders were killed during internal conflicts within the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in the Bago mountain range. When there were splits in the party, the more powerful side simply killed the weaker side. Some student leaders killed were my colleagues. Soe Win, the elder brother of Po Than Joung, and my classmate, was one of the victims. Soe Win, Thein Htun, Soe Myint, Aung Thein Naing, and I were assigned to public relations, especially with senior people like Sayagyi Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, General Kyaw Zaw, and U Tun Tint. I am the only survivor from that whole group. Aung Thein Naing, Kyaw Khin, and Thein Tun were also killed in the Bago range. I do not know whether the CPB internal splits were democratic or not. It was the destiny of the CPB and its leaders. Some people still want to discuss it today. I used to make posters and campaign with the people killed in Bago. I was so sorry to hear about their fates. Po Than Joung is the younger brother of Soe Win, and Nyi Pu Lay was the youngest brother. The children of Ludu U Hla and Daw Amar were outstanding. Soe Win was qualified to attend honors classes available only in Rangoon. If he had come to Rangoon, he would have survived.

Twenty-three student leaders, including me, escaped death but were sentenced to prison. Yin Htun and I were imprisoned



in Thayat Prison. Student leaders like me, Ko Ba Swe Lay, Ko Thet (president of the ABFSU), Ko Tin Htun (secretary of the ABFSU), and other executive members were all the same age, around 20 years old, when this took place.

### **How are student activism and political views related?**

If we talk about student activism in recent years, no substantial achievement has been seen from student activists, whether related to the National League for Democracy or not. Generally, they have not lived in a democratic era like we did and cannot build themselves up to become a student leader. Although it has become more open nowadays, students are divided into many groups. It is not a positive sign for sustainability and working together in the long run. Student activities cannot be successfully conducted if there are conflicts due to political beliefs, for example, between Marxists and non-Marxists. There were three different political groups among students during our time: Communist Party, Red Flag, and People's Volunteer Organization. These political affiliations and beliefs were individual and were kept separate to the student unions.

Student unions have a responsibility to function according to their constitution. Student leaders have no obligation to force different political beliefs on people. For example, a student leader from China may talk about communism or try to persuade others to follow communism because the communist party is the ruling government in China. We did not have this context. We did not comment about Marxism when we were doing student union business. Members explicitly explained how it worked to other newer members. There was also no complication in the student union because senior student leaders admonished juniors thoroughly. I can't tell if there is such a practice now in 2016. Political beliefs, for example, in Marxism or liberal democracy, are personal rights, not to be discussed in the student union.

During our time, Ko Ba Swe Lay, my fellow townsman, was president of the RUSU. The ruling party and government tried

to destroy student unity, first the AFPFL and then the military's Burma Socialist Programme Party. When arrested, I was charged with having connections with the CPB, but not for being a student leader or for the other positions held in other organizations. It is a natural response because they consider communists as their enemy. Fortunately, they did not kill the communists that were captured. From my experience, unity among students fell apart while U Nu was the leader of AFPFL.

I mentioned the strike against the October student holiday changes in 1953 earlier. It was really horrible. The Ava Hostel was the base for the demonstrators at night. Mr. Raschid, a former president of the RUSU himself, and Bo Khin Maung Lay, the then-Minister of Home Affairs, led the crackdown on the strike. They came to Ava Hostel at 4 a.m. with riot police and used an armored vehicle to destroy the door. Riot police used water cannons and teargas and violently beat the students. Over 40 students in the Ava Hostel were hospitalized. This history should not be ignored. The truth must be claimed based on solid evidence.

As a student leader, I did everything except die for the cause. I was in life-threatening situations but survived. I would probably have died on 7 July 1962 if I was not arrested before the shooting started with live ammunition. Even though I was never given a formal duty or obligation in politics, I feel the responsibility as an experienced activist to voice my opinion on contemporary political issues.

On the other hand, I need to turn a blind eye to some issues. It is not appropriate for a person to talk too much and think very highly of himself. Do not consider that you know best about every issue. Politicians must have strong beliefs, a broad perspective, and be far-sighted.

## References

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