

Uttar Pradesh farmers latest victims of Indian business' land grab

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Three protesting farmers were shot dead and more than forty others injured August 14, when police opened fire on a protest at Jikarpur, a village in the Aligarh District of Uttar Pradesh (UP).

The farmers were protesting against the land expropriations being carried out by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) state government to build a 165-kilometer highway, the Jamuna (or Yamuna) Expressway, linking India's capital, New Delhi, with Agra, the city that is home to the Taj Mahal.

The BSP professes to uphold the interests of the Dalits (former untouchables) and all the oppressed, but it is implementing pro-market policies in tandem with big business.

Police attacked the farmers after they gathered to protest the rumored arrest of a leader of the anti-expropriation campaign. A pitched battle ensued, in which the authorities claim one policeman was killed and 15 others injured.

Farmers in UP's Aligarh and Mathura Districts had been agitating for several weeks in protest against the meager compensation they have been offered for their land. Many complain that even before agreeing to sell their plots, government agencies and private firms have set about destroying their bore-well equipment, tanks and other farm facilities.

A farmer told the *Times of India*, "I have not given away my land. Still they have demolished my tubewell room and uprooted constructions on my land... How can they do this?"

"There are," continued the farmer, "more than 30 villagers in this very village who are facing the same problem."

According to press reports, the UP government is seeking to acquire 10,000 acres in what is one of India's prime agricultural regions with a view to

enticing businesses to invest in UP with the offer of cheap, well-connected land. Its aim is to make the Jamuna Expressway a corridor of shopping plazas, industrial estates and townships (housing developments).

Close to 1,200 villages in western UP have been "notified" by the UP government that it intends to acquire lands in their vicinity for the highway project.

Initially the government was offering farmers compensation of just 449 Rupees (less than \$10 US) per square meter. Following the adverse political fallout from the Jikarpur shooting, it increased this to 590 Rupees (about \$13) per square meter.

The farmers have been demanding 950 Rupees (\$21) per square meter, the amount the government paid in Noida, which lies in another UP district closer to New Delhi. They also want the compensation to be tax-free.

The Monday following the Saturday evening massacre in Jikarpur, both house of India's national parliament were rocked by angry protests, as the BSP's bourgeois political opponents sought to use the farmers' deaths to score political points.

The Hindu supremacist and ardently pro-big business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the UP-based Samajwadi (Socialist) Party or SP were especially vocal. Its name notwithstanding, the SP is a caste-based party, notorious for its close ties to the Ambanis, the billionaire family that owns Reliance Industries.

Not to be outdone, the Congress Party, the dominant party in India's United Progressive Alliance coalition government, dispatched Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and the heir apparent to the party leadership, to visit the farmers, on August 21, a week after the police assault. He claimed he would take up their cause in all appropriate forums.

Following the August 14 shooting, Basudeb Acharia

of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), lashed out against the BSP—a party that little over a year ago the Stalinists were actively courting to anchor a “Third Front” in opposition to the Congress and BJP. Said Acharia, “Farmers who were demanding right prices for their land in Mathura and Aligarh did not get compensation, but instead had to face bullets... In the name of SEZs (Special Economic Zones), thousands of acres of land is being snatched from farmers and being given to industry.”

This is pure hypocrisy and demagoguery. The CPM-led Left Front government in West Bengal used deadly force in 2007 to quell peasant opposition to its attempt to seize land in Nandigram for an SEZ to be operated by an Indonesia-based multinational.

In an attempt to defuse the political crisis triggered by the Jikarpur shooting, UP Chief Minister and BSP supremo Mayawati has ordered a judicial probe into the shooting and raised the compensation for families of those killed from Rs. 500,000 (about \$10,000) to Rs 1 million (\$20,000). The injured are to be given Rs. 200,000 (\$4,200).

The BSP government also now claims that farmers who do not wish to part with their land will not be forced to do so. But even if the government and business stop using underhanded methods to force the peasants from their lands, industrial and commercial development will quickly make farming impracticable.

Mayawati responded to the attacks from her political opponents by accusing them of having “no other work but to instigate farmers.”

She also chastised the Congress for failing to replace the British colonial state’s Land Acquisition Act—legislation that empowers India’s Union and state governments to expropriate land essentially at will. Those affected have no recourse, although they can petition the courts to increase the financial compensation to be paid them.

Suddenly feigning concern for those whom her government is abusing and repressing, Mayawati declared, “It is most unfortunate that the central government led by Congress is still following the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 even after 63 years of independence when it should have amended [the Act] to safeguard the interests of farmers...and it is because of this that farmers all over the country are made to bear the brunt.”

The forced seizure of peasants’ land for capitalist development has emerged as an explosive issue across India. Peasants are given meager cash payments for the land that is their livelihood and the sole means of support for their families. Many soon find themselves forced to migrate to the cities in search of wage labor. As for the sharecroppers and agricultural laborers whose lives have been bound up with the expropriated land, they frequently receive no compensation at all.

Hoping to deflect responsibility from her own government for seizing land for big business, Mayawati went on to observe that the majority of SEZs have sprouted in states ruled by the Congress and BJP. This she said proved “their proximity to the capitalists.”

The reality is that the BSP—as the Jikarpur shooting graphically illustrates—is also a tool of big business. A corrupt, caste-based political machine, the BSP has repeatedly aligned with the rightwing BJP in national and state politics. It exploits the anger of the Dalits and other impoverished Indians in the interests of a venal petty-bourgeois layer that was nourished by the Indian state’s reservation (affirmative action) policy and that now seeks to use its claim to “represent” the Dalits to secure a share of the booty of Indian capitalism.

Big business, for its part, well recognizes that the BSP is a useful and pliant instrument. According to India’s Income Tax Department, the BSP has close to 3 billion Rupees (about \$60 million US) in assets—an enormous sum in India. Indeed, the BSP’s assets are second only to that of the Indian bourgeoisie’s premier governing party, the Congress Party.



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