

India: Tamil Nadu police brutally attack Jallikattu protesters

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Tamil Nadu police brutally attacked a peaceful mass demonstration against an Indian Supreme Court ban on the age-old Tamil sport of Jallikattu (bull taming) in the early hours of Monday, January 23.

Indian authorities had been taken aback by the mass character of the protests. They had erupted, outside the traditional political parties, less than a week before and rapidly won support from broad sections of the rural and urban population in India's sixth largest state.

As the protests spread and anti-Indian government slogans became increasingly prevalent, political authorities in New Delhi and Chennai became apprehensive. First and foremost, because they are keenly aware that Tamil Nadu, despite being a so-called "advanced state," is bursting with social anger over mass joblessness, chronic poverty and gaping social inequality and, therefore, fear that any mobilization involving large numbers of working people could spin out of control.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian government authorities were also concerned that the protests, which had a distinct Tamil taint and were largely directed against India's highest court and central government, could be exploited by Tamil regional chauvinists and separatists.

The decision to crack down on the protest movement was taken jointly by the ruling AIADMK state government, led by Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam, and the central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP. Just hours after police launched their violent attack on protesters gathered on Chennai's Marina Beach, the Home Ministry said it was ready to deploy Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) personnel to "restore law and order" in Tamil Nadu if the state government requested support.

In reality, it was the police, acting on orders from their political masters, who ran amuck on Marina Beach.

Angered by the unprovoked police violence unleashed on the Jallikattu protesters, several hundred fishermen intervened. The police then turned viciously on them. Police broke into the fishermen's nearby houses, smashing their household items and attacking men, women and children. Video clips showing police beating people, including women, and setting fire to three-wheeler taxis and motorcycles went viral.

The Jallikattu protest movement mushroomed, spreading to

cities, towns and villages across Tamil Nadu, after police arrested several hundred people for joining a January 17 protest in Alanganallur, a village famous for hosting Jallikattu competitions.

Three days later, on January 20, unions affiliated with the Tamil Nadu-based DMK, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), and other opposition parties sponsored a 12-hour sympathy strike in an attempt to boost their flagging popular support. The strike severely disrupted public sector transport, especially bus travel but also passenger trains. Many schools and colleges were also shut down to express solidarity with the Jallikattu protest movement.

Tamil Nadu's Tourism Dept. had previously showcased Jallikattu in Alanganallur. However, in May 2014 the Supreme Court (SC) of India banned the sport in response to a lawsuit filed against it by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) India, an "animal rights" NGO. The court based its ruling on legislation passed in 2011 under the previous Congress Party-led national government that forbids bulls from being used as performing animals.

A sport whose roots can be traced back to cow-herders in ancient India, Jallikattu is generally performed during the four-day Tamil Nadu harvest festival of Thai Pongal, which ended this year on January 17. It is meant to be a display of male prowess and involves the subduing of a bull. However, unlike traditional Spanish-style bull-fighting it does not conclude with the killing of the animal.

Whatever the merits of Jallikattu, it is not played with the intention of giving injury to anyone. As with other such cultural activities, socialists do not support their arbitrary suppression by the capitalist state and uphold the democratic right of people to organize their cultural and leisure activities.

The massive protests against the banning of Jallikattu was of a contradictory character.

Undoubtedly it gave expression to and was fueled by growing alienation from, and anger with, the authorities and political establishment. When Panneerselvam, after conferring with Modi and quickly passing a state law legalizing Jallikattu, went to Alanganallur to inaugurate the sport's revival, protesters barred his entry to the village. Seeman, the leader of the virulent Tamil chauvinist Naam Thamizhar Katchi (We Tamils

Party), was also given short shrift when he tried to join the protests.

In TV interviews several protesters did point to the dire social crisis in rural areas due to drought, unemployment, crop failures, and mounting debt. A particularly jarring expression of this crisis is the phenomenon of farmer suicides. In Tamil Nadu, they reached a new high in December, with 106 farmers reportedly taking their lives due to economic distress.

The pressures on working people, rural and urban, have been exacerbated by the Modi government's demonetisation measure. Touted as a "surgical strike" against "corruption," it is actually an attempt to shore up India's indebted banking system at the expense of working people. The economic turmoil caused by rescinding more than 85 percent of India's currency has resulted in millions of workers losing their jobs.

According to an analysis published by the *Indian Express*, between November, when demonetization was announced, and January, the number of jobless workers seeking employment under the government's National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme spiked from 3 million to more than 8 million per day (see: "India's demonetisation scheme causing mass hardship").

That said, the protest movement had a Tamil regionalist slant, one the state's political establishment sought to make ever more explicit.

On leaving for his meeting with Modi in New Delhi, Panneerselvam vowed that he would "not back off even a bit from upholding the heritage and culture of the Tamils."

The opposition parties, including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, joined in the effort to separate the Supreme Court's arbitrary ban on Jallikattu from its systematic attack on democratic and worker rights and to portray the ban in exclusivist terms as an attack on Tamil culture and "Tamil pride."

For its part, the Maoist group that publishes *vinavu.com* denounced what it called the "Delhi imperialists" for their attack on Tamil cultural rights, while claiming to oppose Jallikattu on the ground "the sport is being played by a dominant caste group." However, as the protest movement gained in strength, the Maoists quickly changed their tune and gave it their full support as an example of Tamil assertion.

For decades, Tamil regionalism has been used as a vital mechanism of class rule, to assert the claims of the local bourgeois elite for greater autonomy and a greater share of the booty of the Indian bourgeoisie, and above all to split the working class in Tamil Nadu, from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere in India and internationally.

The CPM and CPI have played a major role in promoting regionalist politics in Tamil Nadu as elsewhere in India, claiming the various regionally-based bourgeois factions are a "progressive" ally in opposing the parties of the so-called big bourgeoisie, the Congress and the BJP.

This has included rallying workers and rural toilers to support

the Tamil state government and elite in their reactionary, decades-long dispute with Karnataka over the sharing of the resources of the Cauvery water. Similarly, in the neighbouring state of Kerala, where the Stalinists have repeatedly led the state government, the CPM has encouraged linguistic-cultural chauvinism, by joining with all manner of right-wing bourgeois and chauvinist outfits, including its ostensible arch-rival, the Congress Party, in a dam dispute with Tamil Nadu.

As part of the parliamentary maneuvers that saw the CPM and CPI back a series of right-wing governments at the Center, most of them Congress-led between 1989 and 2008, the Stalinists went back and forth in Tamil Nadu between supporting the big business DMK and AIADMK.

After the AIADMK ditched them as electoral allies on the eve of the 2014 national election, the Stalinists cobbled together another right-wing alliance out of DMK and AIADMK split-offs and other regional parties, the abortive People's Welfare Front (PWF).

The sudden eruption of mass protests over the now-overturned Jallikattu ban is only the latest sign of seething social anger and opposition across India. Last September some 100 million workers participated in a one-day general strike against the BJP government's pro-investor policies.

For this opposition to find positive and sustained expression a new working class party must be built through the ruthless exposure of the Stalinist CPM and CPI and their trade union affiliates as props of bourgeois rule. Such a party must be based on the Trotskyist program of Permanent Revolution: the working class must rally the rural poor and other toilers behind it in the struggle for a workers' government based on a socialist internationalist program. The agricultural crisis, which was at the root of the mass protest over Jallikattu, cannot be resolved without abolishing the capitalist profit system.



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