

India: Madhya Pradesh police shoot protesting farmers

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Madhya Pradesh state police shot and killed six farmers and injured eight others at a mass protest in Mandsaur district on Tuesday. The farmers, who were demonstrating over several demands, including better prices for their products and loan waivers, are continuing their agitation in defiance of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) state government's repression.

Farmers responded to the attack by extending their protests on Wednesday to six other districts, including Neemuch, Dewas and Ujjain. Mandsaur farmers refused to allow the cremation of the bodies of the murdered farmers until BJP Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan visited the area. In Bhopal, the state capital, farmers burned an effigy of Chouhan.

The government initially denied the shootings but later attempted to justify the police actions, claiming officers opened fire "in self-defence." It then promised to pay 10 million rupees' compensation to the families of the dead farmers and hold an investigation into the incident. As in the past, any official inquiry will either exonerate the police or find convenient scapegoats.

At the same time, state authorities imposed a curfew throughout the Mandsaur district, with police declaring it would not be lifted "until the situation becomes normal." On Wednesday, police were mobilised throughout Bhopal to stop farmers marching into the city. The Madhya Pradesh home ministry called on the Indian government to provide additional security forces to suppress the growing protests. The state curfew was partially lifted yesterday, between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m., for women and children.

Farmers began their agitation on June 1, dumping vegetables and milk on the roads in protest against the low prices for their products and demanding debt forgiveness. The state government responded by deploying police and claiming the farmers' campaign

was instigated by the opposition, mainly Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie. The first clashes between farmers and police occurred on June 4 in the Sehore, Indore and Bhopal districts.

To try to end the demonstrations, Chief Minister Chouhan called a meeting on June 4 with the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), a farmers' organisation affiliated to the extreme-right RSS, the ideological mentor of the BJP.

While the BKS agreed to call off the protests, the farmers were not ready to end their campaign without their demands being met. Two other farmers' groups—the Rashtriya Kissan Mazdoor Sangh (RKMS) and Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU)—decided to continue demonstrating.

Later that day, Chouhan belatedly announced the government would purchase onions at eight rupees per kilogram. The announcement only further inflamed farmers. The next day, he called a press conference and announced a 10 billion-rupee price stabilisation fund in a bid to counteract a precipitous fall in vegetable prices this year.

Farmers' demonstrations have also occurred in the neighbouring western state of Maharashtra and are spreading to Rajasthan, intensifying the political crisis of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP-led national government. Last month, Modi declared his government would double farmers' income over the next five years.

Maharashtra farmers continued their protests this week. Devendra Fadnavi, the state's chief minister, previously promised that the debts of distressed farmers would be waived before October 31. Rajasthan farmers will strike indefinitely next week to demand higher crop prices, pensions and loan waivers.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Chouhan claims the

state recorded a 20 percent growth in agriculture during 2014–15 and boasts about it winning India’s national agricultural award for five consecutive years. The situation facing farmers, however, is desperate. For the second year in a row, there have been almost no buyers for the state’s bumper onion crop. Prices have dropped as low as one rupee per kilogram. Farmers have also been forced to sell winter crops, like tomatoes and potatoes, at giveaway prices.

Falling prices, droughts, small plot sizes, inadequate irrigation and production methods, and large, high-interest debts have made conditions impossible for farmers. Thousands commit suicide each year.

In Madhya Pradesh alone, 1,982 farmers took their lives in the 12 months to February. This is nearly one-tenth of the farmer suicides recorded in the state over the past 16 years. In drought-ravaged Mandsaur district, the centre of this week’s protests, one farmer committed suicide every five hours during the past two years.

While the Madhya Pradesh state government has blamed the protests on Congress and other opposition parties, the desperate situation facing farmers is a direct result of the big-business policies imposed by governments of every political colouration at the national and state levels.

While the opposition Congress is posturing as “pro-farmer” to seek to exploit the situation for its own advantage, it has the same political record as the ruling BJP.

In 1991, Congress initiated pro-investor economic reforms that transformed India into a cheap labour platform of global capital. Successive BJP-led and Congress-led governments deepened these neo-liberal economic reforms at the national and state levels. Meagre subsidies for farmers were dismantled.

On Wednesday, BJP national vice president Venkaiah Naidu cautioned Congress against exploiting farmers’ protests. “I just want to warn the Congress not to fuel violence in the name of farmers,” he declared. “It will boomerang on you.”

Naidu’s comments reveal fears that the farmers’ protests could escalate out of control and precipitate broader struggles by working people and the rural poor throughout the country.

On Thursday, Sitaram Yechury, the general secretary of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or

CPM, declared in a tweet: “Are we all paying the Krishi Kalyan Cess to the Central government so that it can buy more bullets to fire on farmers?”

Yechury’s reference was to a 0.5 percent tax introduced last June by the BJP-led national government that was supposed to finance the agricultural sector and farmers’ welfare.

The attitude of Yechury’s CPM toward farmers, however, is not fundamentally different to that of the current state and national governments. In 2007, the CPM-led Left Front government in West Bengal mobilised thousands of state police and party goons to attack farmers in Nandigram who fought its attempt to expropriate 14,500 acres of their land, to build a special economic zone for foreign and local investors. Twelve farmers were killed in the bloody clashes.



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