

Mass farmer protest rattles India's far-right BJP government

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An agitation by farmers demanding the repeal of recently adopted agrarian “reform” legislation has become a major political crisis for India’s far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

Tens of thousands of farmers who police had blocked from entering the Delhi National Capital Territory and bringing their demands to the seat of India’s government late last week have been encamped at Delhi’s borders for the past six days. Their tractors and trucks are blocking several major roads into Delhi from the neighbouring states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, and the farmers have vowed to remain until their demands are met.

The farmers are protesting three laws that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP rushed through parliament in September, at the same time as they were attacking workers’ right to strike and gutting restrictions on plant closures and mass layoffs. Long demanded by big business, the IMF and World Bank, the BJP’s agrarian “reform” laws are aimed at strengthening the power of agri-business at the expense of farmers and consumers. They promote contract farming, undermine the government-regulated system of agricultural markets (known as *mandis*), and will open the door, farmers fear, to abolishing the Minimum Support Price for certain basic commodities.

The farmers are also demanding the government abandon its proposed Electricity Bill 2020, which would eliminate or greatly reduce subsidized power rates for farmers.

The Narendra Modi-led national government orchestrated a massive security operation last week to prevent the farmers from bringing their protest to India’s capital and largest city and, if possible, from ever reaching Delhi’s borders.

The BJP state government of Uttar Pradesh and the nearby BJP-ruled state of Madhya Pradesh deployed paramilitary forces to block convoys of protesting farmers

from approaching the capital. In Haryana, which borders Delhi to the south, west, and north, the BJP-led government was even more aggressive. Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar ordered the state’s border with Punjab, one of the principal centres of the protest movement, sealed as of Nov. 25, and invoked Section 144 of the Criminal Code under which all gatherings of more than four people are illegal. Several dozen leaders of farm organizations were taken into “preventive custody” and police were mobilized throughout Haryana to block farmers from traversing the state.

Nevertheless, by Friday, the day that the “Delhi Chalo” (Let us go to Delhi) mobilization was to converge on the capital, tens of thousands of farmers from Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand had reached Delhi’s border near Tigris in the south and Singhu in the north. There they were met by barricades of barbed wire and sand-laden trucks, tear gas and water cannon.

The authorities succeeded in preventing the protest from reaching Delhi. However, their actions have only served to anger the farmers and muster sympathy for them among broad sections of working people across India. According to media reports, the numbers camped at Delhi’s borders have grown to well in excess of 100,000 people. At one border point, the line of protesters reportedly stretches for 30 kilometres (19 miles).

The head of a farmers’ union in Uttar Pradesh who intends to join the agitation later this week told CNN, “We are trying to be wary of COVID but we don’t have an option. It is a question of life and death. We are the ones who have provided food, milk, vegetables when the whole country was in lockdown. It is the government who has put us at risk by introducing these laws during COVID.”

The Modi government has clearly been rattled by the militancy and determination of the farmers. BJP representatives have oscillated between suggesting that the farmers have been duped by the opposition or are led

by treasonous elements. Last week, Amit Malviya, the head of the BJP's IT cell, sought to whip up communal animosity against the protesting farmers, many of whom are Punjabi Sikhs, when he blamed the agitation on Maoists and "Khalistanis." The latter is a reference to the reactionary movement to create a separate Sikh state, Khalistan, which was ruthlessly suppressed by the Indian state during the 1970s and 1980s.

Initially the government refused to meet with leaders of the Delhi Chalo protest, which is supported by more than 500 *kisan sabhas* (peasant unions) and other farm organizations, until the agitation was called off. Later it made talks conditional on the farmers agreeing to move to a large field and fair ground in north Delhi, the Nirankari Samagan Ground. Some accepted the government's offer. But the vast majority of farmers have refused, arguing that relocating their protest to a field far from the heart of Delhi and where they will be surrounded by security forces would be akin to agreeing to their jailing or kettling.

The government's greatest fear is that the farmers' protest will serve to fan growing social opposition within the working class.

The launch of the Delhi Chalo was timed to coincide with the Nov. 26 one-day general strike called by the country's major central labour federation and supported by numerous independent unions. Tens of millions of workers walked off the job across India to demand the scrapping of the BJP's "labour" and "agrarian" reforms, a halt to privatisation, and emergency financial support for the hundreds of millions whose meagre incomes have been slashed as a result of the government's ruinous handling of the pandemic.

On Sunday evening, Home Minister Amit Shah met with Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to discuss the crisis. Rajnath Singh's involvement underscores that the BJP government is preparing to deploy the military and, if need be, use lethal violence to suppress the farmer agitation.

But the BJP recognizes such action could backfire, serving to set India ablaze, and thus is now maneuvering to find "a political solution" to the crisis.

Yesterday, Tomar and the Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Pyush Goyal held talks with protest leaders, and a further round of talks has been scheduled for Thursday.

On the government's part, the talks are a charade. Big business is adamant that no substantive changes be made

to the "reform bills," and Modi and his chief henchman, Amit Shah, are keenly aware that any retreat would derail their drive to restore the profitability of Indian capitalism through a promised "quantum jump" in "pro-investor" reforms. On Sunday, Modi used his monthly radio address to once again sing the praises of the farm bills that the government rammed through parliament with virtually no debate in September.

The government will use the offer of further talks, perhaps a handful of cosmetic concessions, and veiled threats of repression to try to prevail on the protest leaders to call off the agitation.

It will also seek to exploit the class and political cleavages within the farmer movement and among the rural masses. Many marginal farmers who eke out a livelihood on tiny plots of land are supporting the protest movement. But it is politically led by prosperous farmers with close connections to sections of the political establishment. Moreover, the farm agitation fails to address the crying social needs of the landless peasants and agricultural workers, who constitute the majority and most oppressed section of the rural masses.

Last but not least, the Hindu supremacist BJP will rely on its ruling class political opponents, whom it routinely vilifies as "anti-national," to help bring the agitation to an end.

All the major opposition parties are claiming to support the agitation for the repeal of the farm bill, and the Congress Party state governments in Punjab and Rajasthan encouraged the Delhi Chalo movement. But the Congress Party, true to its historic role as the premier party of the Indian bourgeois, is now pressing the farm leaders to wind down their agitation.

The Congress Chief Minister in Punjab, Captain Amarinder Singh, urged the farmers to accept the government's "offer" to relocate their protest to the fair ground and hold talks. He is now claiming that the farmers have "already won half the battle" because they have brought "the Union government to the negotiating table."



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