

Modi maneuvers as support for Indian farmers' protest swells

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Indian farmers have called for a four-hour *Bharat bandh* (all-India shutdown) from 11 AM to 3 PM today to press their demand that the country's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government rescind a series of recently-adopted laws that put them at the mercy of domestic and international agribusiness.

Several hundred thousand farmers, some with their wives and children, are currently camped at Singhu and other entry points to India's Delhi National Capital Territory. Many have been there since Nov. 27, when police, acting on the orders of the BJP government, used tear gas, water cannons and barbed wire barricades to block them from entering Delhi.

The protest has since swelled as other farmers, including from southern India, flock to join, and now constitutes a serious political crisis for the BJP government.

"On TV, I saw the videos of farmers being attacked with water cannons and tear gas," Vijay Gorle, a farmer from the Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, told the *Hindustan Times* on December 7. "They needed the country's support, so four of us caught a train to reach Delhi station and from there a cab to reach here on Saturday."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP used the September Monsoon session of parliament to ram through a series of measures long demanded by Indian and international capital, claiming they were needed to revive an Indian economy that had been roiled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's ruinous response to it.

These measures include three agricultural bills that are the focus of the farmers' agitation, and a "reform" of the labour code. The latter illegalizes most worker job action, promotes precarious contract-labour employment, and guts restrictions on mass layoffs and plant closures.

The farmers launched their agitation on Nov. 26, the same day that tens of millions of workers across India mounted a one-day protest strike to oppose the Modi government's "labour reform" and privatization drive, and to demand emergency financial assistance for the hundreds of millions of impoverished workers and toilers who have been left to fend for themselves amid the ongoing socio-economic disaster.

There is huge popular sympathy for the farmers and an even larger well of opposition to the Hindu supremacist BJP, which

is ruthlessly implementing "pro-investor" policies, while relentlessly stoking anti-Muslim chauvinism.

But the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—and the trade unions are doing everything they can to demobilize the working class, and channel the mass anger behind the right-wing bourgeois opposition and futile appeals to Modi to change course.

The CPM-aligned Centre for Indian Trade Unions, the CPI's trade union affiliate, the All India Trade Union Congress, and eight other central trade union federations—along with numerous independent unions, including those representing railway and bank workers—have pledged their support for today's *Bharat bandh*. However, if they have their way, virtually all workers will remain on the job. Any action in support of the farmers' will be limited to lunchtime picketing or after work rallies, and in the case of the bank workers to wearing "pro-farmer" badges.

The All India Motor Transport Congress, which represents owner-operator truck drivers and truck companies, has by contrast called on its members to keep their vehicles off the road in a show of support for the farmers. According to an AIMTC representative, 65 percent of their members' business involves the transport of farm goods.

What the Stalinists are above all determined to prevent is the working class intervening as an independent force, using the crisis the farmer protests have provoked to fight for its own class demands and to advance a socialist program to rally India's toilers behind it in a struggle against the Modi government and the entire Indian capitalist order. Such a program would defend not only the farmers, but all the rural masses—first and foremost, the impoverished agricultural workers and landless peasants—from the encroachments and privations of big business.

Last week, Kerala Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Pinarayi Vijayan tweeted: "We urge the Government of India to listen to the protesting farmers and resolve the issue in an amicable manner. The whole of our country needs to come together on this; because farmers are the lifeblood of this country."

On Sunday, the CPM and CPI issued a joint statement with

the Congress Party—until recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government—and various regional parties, including the Tamil Nadu-based DMK, Uttar Pradesh-based Samajwadi Party, and the Maharashtra-based Nationalist Congress Party. The statement expressed support for today’s *Bharat bandh* and denounced the BJP government’s agricultural laws, saying they “threaten India’s food security, destroy agriculture and our farmers” and will subject farmers and consumers “to the caprices of multi-national agri-business corporates and domestic corporates.”

This is a cynical fraud. When in government, all of these parties have themselves implemented similar “pro-market” reforms. Indeed, from 1991 till 2014, when the Modi government came to power in Delhi, Congress-led governments did much of the heavy lifting in instituting the Indian ruling class’ “new economic policy,” and its corollary, the pursuit of closer ties and ultimately a “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism.

The opposition’s “support” for the farmers is aimed at ensuring their agitation does not serve as a catalyst for a broader working class-led challenge to the Modi government and the bourgeoisie’s class war agenda. They also hope to be able to exploit it to push back against the BJP, which has systematically squeezed them from positions of political power and influence.

While feigning support for the farmers, the Congress Chief Minister of Punjab, whose farmers have been in the forefront of the agitation against the BJP’s “agricultural reform” laws, met last Thursday with Amit Shah, India’s Home Minister and Modi’s chief henchman, to seek “an early resolution to the impasse.” At the conclusion of the meeting, Captain Amarinder Singh said he had urged Shah to make concessions to the farmers “soon,” because the farmers’ action “affects the economy of my Punjab as well as the security of the nation.” He then appealed to the farmers to “just as urgently find a solution to this problem,” repeating that it is “impacting national security.”

Singh’s remarks about “national security” highlight the fears within the political elite that the farmers’ agitation could spark a much broader opposition movement or result in a violent clash between the protesting farmers and security forces that would further discredit the Indian state in the eyes of the masses.

The BJP government hoped to snuff out the “Delhi *Chalo*” (Let’s go to Delhi) farm protest at the outset through a massive state mobilization on Nov. 26-27 that saw much of Haryana, the BJP-ruled state that neighbours Delhi and Punjab, turned into an armed camp. But that failed, as tens of thousands of farmers managed to get through the police gauntlet to the borders of the capital territory.

Since then the government has been maneuvering, hoping to defuse the crisis through promises of a handful of cosmetic changes to the bills. At the same time, it continues to prepare

for a possible massive security operation involving the army to suppress the farmers’ protest. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has joined Home Minister Shah at all high-level government consultations on the farm agitation.

The Modi government and big business, as evidenced by numerous editorials in the major dailies, are adamant that the farm bills not be repealed. Speaking Sunday, Minister of State for Agriculture Kailash Choudhary reiterated that the most the government is willing to offer are “amendments.” As the government has done throughout, Choudhary sought to blame the agitation on the opposition parties and “agitators.”

“I don’t think the real farmers, working in their farms, are bothered about” the farm laws, he declared.

BJP representatives have also sought to paint the agitation as limited to Haryana and the majority-Sikh Punjab, going so far as to smear the movement as being infiltrated if not led by “Khalistanis,” i.e., supporters of the creation of a communalist Sikh state. While the anti-farm bill agitation has been centered in those two states, it has support across wide swathes of rural India.

To date, five meetings have been held between farm leaders and BJP government officials, and a further meeting is planned for Wednesday.

The protests have been supported by small and marginal farmers, but the movement is politically led by better off farmers with connections to the political establishment. They have sought to appeal to the government by calling for “politics” to be kept out of the movement, and while welcoming the support of the opposition parties have said that their supporters should not raise party banners or flags when participating in today’s *Bharat bandh*.

The Delhi police, which is directly under Home Minister Shah’s authority, has vowed to deal sternly with anyone who attempts to disrupt people’s movements or “forcefully” shut shops during today’s protest. BJP-ruled Gujarat, Modi’s home state, has imposed Section 144 of the Criminal Code, banning all gatherings of more than four people. Madhya Pradesh’s BJP chief minister, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, told a BJP rally, “We won’t spare those elements who may try to create chaos in the country under the cover of farmers’ protest.”



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