

As Indian farmers step up protests against pro-agribusiness “reform,” Modi prepares mass repression

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Indian farmers are threatening to expand their protests after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government reiterated that it will not repeal the three pro-agri-business laws it rushed through parliament last September.

Hundreds of thousands of farmers, many with their wives and children, are currently camped at four entrances to the Delhi National Capital Territory. Many have been there since Nov. 27, when phalanxes of security forces, acting on the orders of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government, barred them from bringing their Delhi *Chalo* (Let’s go to Delhi) agitation to India’s capital and largest city.

On Tuesday, millions across India joined a *Bharat Bandh* (all-India shut down) called by farmer organizations. According to the coordination committee of the *Kisan Morcha* (Peasants’ March), more than five million people participated in the four-hour shutdown, with 20,000 protests held in at least 22 of India’s 28 states.

In the Punjab, where the farmers’ agitation is centered, daily life ground to a halt. In Haryana, which lies between Punjab and Delhi, there were protests throughout the state. Markets were shut down, and several roads and highways were occupied. Workers from Maruti Suzuki, Hero Motorcycle, and other auto plants in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, which lies in Haryana on the outskirts of Delhi, held a demonstration in support of the farmers.

On Tuesday evening, Modi’s chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, led a government delegation in a hastily-organized, four-hour meeting with representatives of some of the dozens of farm organizations that are leading the protest movement. Shah repeated previous government offers to make minor amendments to the three laws, which will throw open Indian agriculture to domestic and transnational corporations by gutting the system of state-run markets, and reducing or eliminating restrictions on contract farming and land ownership. But he dismissed out of hand the farmers’ call for the three laws to be repealed.

Big business, which applauded the agrarian “reform” laws and an accompanying labour “reform” that outlaws most strikes and promotes “labour market flexibility,” is adamant that the BJP government stand its ground. First, because they view “modernizing” Indian agriculture at small farmers’ expense as a key element in competing with China for investment; and second, because they fear a visible government retreat in the face of the

farmer protests would galvanize social opposition.

On Nov. 26, the first day of the Delhi *Chalo* agitation, tens of millions of workers across India mounted a one-day general strike to protest the government’s “pro-investor” economic policies. They also demanded emergency aid for the hundreds of millions who have been left to fend for themselves over the past 8 months as India has been roiled by the COVID-19 pandemic and its catastrophic economic fallout.

On Wednesday morning, the BJP-dominated Union cabinet met and formally approved a 9-point “offer” to the farmers. Under this “offer,” a handful of the most provocative clauses in two of the three laws would be eliminated. These include a stipulation that private markets, unlike the state-run *mandis*, shall be tax-free, and provisions that bar farmers from seeking redress from the courts for any matters regulated by the agrarian “reform” laws if government officials or corporate representatives have acted in “good faith”

The government also now says it is willing to “provide a written assurance that the existing Minimum Support Price (MSP) system will continue.” Farmers, however, want the MSP enshrined in law, since they have no confidence the government will honour its word. As it is, the MSP system has already largely collapsed due to the “pro-market” policies pursued by central and state governments, both those led by the BJP and its allies and those led by the ostensible “pro-farmer” opposition parties.

The farmers’ organizations have rejected the BJP government offer, and are now threatening to begin blocking the Jaipur-Delhi and Agra-Delhi highways and other roads into Delhi, one by one, starting no later than Saturday, Dec. 12. In a press release, the aforementioned All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee said the “Modi government (is) insincere and arrogant about resolving farmers’ demands; all farmers’ rightly reject old proposals dressed up as new.”

The farm organizations have also called for a nationwide *gherao* or sit-down protest blocking transportation routes on Dec. 14. But they remain open to further talks with the government.

The militancy of the farmers has clearly rattled Modi and his government.

They continue to seeking a means to defuse the crisis, by offering minimal concessions and exploiting divisions within the farm groups whose leaders are largely drawn from more privileged

farmers and who have close ties to various factions of the political establishment. And while the BJP lashes out, often in vile communally-charged rhetoric against the opposition parties, it also knows that it can count on their help in preventing the farmer agitation from becoming a catalyst for a broader explosion of social anger, especially from the working class.

Last week, Amit Shah held private talks with the Punjab Congress Chief Minister Captain Amerinder Singh. At their conclusion, the Congress leader called on both the government and farmers to seek a compromise so as to ensure “national security” is not jeopardized.

That said, it is manifestly evident that the government is also making the political and technical preparations for violently suppressing the farmers’ agitation. Defence Minister Rajan Singh has been conspicuously present whenever the most senior BJP ministers have met to discuss the government’s response to the farm protests.

Massive repression, it must be recalled, was the government’s initial response. On Nov. 26-27, the central government and the BJP state governments in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh mounted a massive security operation to prevent the farmers from ever getting close to Delhi. Despite deploying paramilitary forces, tear gas and water-canon, invoking Section 144 of the Criminal Code in Haryana, thereby making all gatherings of more than four people illegal, and arresting hundreds; the authorities failed to stop tens of thousands of farmers reaching the borders of Delhi. There they were met with an ever-larger show of force.

The government provided a taste of what it is preparing during Tuesday’s Bharat bandh. Section 144 was imposed throughout Delhi and the entire state of Gujarat. The Delhi police, which are under the direct control of Home Minister Amit Shah, placed Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) head Arvind Kejriwal, under house arrest after he met farmers protesting at the city’s Singhu border entrance.

In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP Chief Minister and arch Hindu supremacist Yogi Adityanath ordered the temporary detention of his main political rival, Samajwadi party leader Akhilesh Yadav, and other Samajwadi party leaders as they were en route to participate in a *Bharat Bandh* rally. The UP police also detained Chandrashekhar Azad, leader of the Bhim Army, a Dalit rights organization, to prevent him from joining the farmers’ protest.

Yesterday, the two BJP ministers most directly responsible for the farm “reform” laws—Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar and Food and Consumer Affairs Minister Raosaheb Danve—sought to smear the farmer agitation as treasonous in a transparent attempt to manufacture a pretext for its violent repression.

“The agitation that is going on is not that of farmers,” Danve told a public event in Maharashtra. “China and Pakistan have a hand behind this ... This is the conspiracy of other countries.” Later Agriculture Minister Tomar urged the media to investigate who is behind the farmers’ protest.

“Media’s eyes are sharp and we will leave it to find it out.”

In so far as the Modi government retains room for maneuver, it is because of the treacherous role being played by the

organizations that claim to speak in the name of the working class: the trade unions and the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

They are determined to prevent the working class from intervening in the political crisis as an independent political force, rallying the farmers and all the rural masses—above all the agricultural workers and landless peasants—behind it in a struggle against the Modi government and Indian capitalism.

The Stalinist unions, the CPM-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the CPI-aligned All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC), joined the other unions in instructing workers to remain on the job during Tuesday’s Bharat bandh, and to confine any show of support for the farmers to participation in protest rallies.

This goes alongside the CPM and CPI’s longstanding efforts to divert the mass opposition to Modi behind the Congress Party, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government and the party that long spearheaded the implementation of “pro-investor” policies, and various right-wing regional and caste-ist parties

Last Sunday, the Stalinist parties joined with the Congress, the Tamil Nadu-based DMK, the Maharashtra-based Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and other right-wing parties in issuing a statement hypocritically declaring support for Tuesday’s farmer protest. On Wednesday evening, CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury and CPI head D. Raja joined former Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and a handful of other opposition leaders in presenting their concerns about the farm bills to Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, a BJP hack.

Spelling out their opposition to the emergence of a mass movement and political general strike to bring down the hated Modi regime, both Yechury and Raja have declared that they don’t want to “politicize” the farmers’ agitation.

“It is a conscious decision on our part to stay away from the protest sites,” said Yechury. “The farmer groups themselves also told us that they would want it this way. So, we have no party banners at the protest sites. The CPI’s Raja was even more explicit, declaring, “We don’t need to politicize it [the farmers’ agitation].”

Meanwhile, in a ruling class frightened by the surge in social opposition and above all the possibility of an explosive intervention by the working class, support is growing for state repression and authoritarian methods of rule. Amitabh Kant, the head of the India government think tank NITI Aayog, told an online event Tuesday that “many more reforms still need to be done” if India is to compete against China as a “manufacturing nation.” He then complained “tough” reforms are “very difficult in the Indian context,” because “we are too much of a democracy.”



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