

# As farmers intensify protests in north India, working-class anger erupts in Karnataka in the south

Keith Jones

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Working class anger is exploding in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, even as hundreds of thousands of farmers from north India camped on the outskirts of the national capital, Delhi, threaten to intensify their agitation against the central government's pro-agribusiness "reform" laws.

Both are resisting the attempts of India's capitalist ruling elite, spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to exploit the socioeconomic catastrophe triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic to intensify the exploitation of India's workers and toilers.

In the name of "reviving" the economy, which contracted by more than 15 percent in the half-year from April through September, the Modi government has accelerated its privatization drive and pushed through farm and labour law "reforms" long demanded by big business. It has rewritten the labour code to criminalize most worker job actions and promote "labour market flexibility." Employers now have even more latitude to use contract workers and hire and fire workers at will.

Early Saturday morning, workers at a Wistron-owned cellphone and IT manufacturing facility in Narasapura, Karnataka vandalized management offices and overturned the cars of senior executives after the Taiwan-based transnational refused to pay them back wages of three months or more. The violence erupted at the conclusion of a protest involving 2,000 workers who had just come off the night shift. The workers attempted to reason with Wistron managers, but became enraged when they arrogantly dismissed their complaints.

At the company's behest, police have arrested at least 132 workers.

Workers at the Wistron facility are subject to a brutal work regime while producing goods, such as iPhones and biotech equipment, for some of the world's largest and most profitable companies, including Apple, Microsoft and Lexar.

Moreover, the company, citing the long COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, has slashed the workers' monthly pay by 25 percent or more.

According to *The Hindu*, Wistron's Narasapura industrial park facility has around 15,000 employees, but only 1,400 of them are actually on the company payrolls. The rest are contract workers. Initially, the company operated three shifts of eight hours each, but currently it has only two 12-hour shifts.

"There is no one to hear our woes," a worker told *The Hindu*. "In addition to nonpayment of salary, we are also facing wage cut issues. So much harassment at work. Even after working all the days in the month, most of us are seeing loss of pay because the attendance system is corrupt. They call us for OT (overtime), but at the end of work they say it (will be compensated with time off). When we apply for it, HR (Human Resources) never sanctions it."

The Karnataka BJP state government has rushed to Wistron's support. It

has ordered police deployed to the recently opened plant and placed full blame for the "wanton violence" on the brutally exploited workers. Deputy Chief Minister Ashwath Narayan condemned the workers for taking the "law into their own hands," adding that they should have raised any complaints in the "appropriate forums," i.e., with the Labour Ministry.

This is a cynical farce. The Labour Department, like the government as a whole, is at the beck and call of the employers. This is exemplified by their actions during the month-long strike/lockout of 3,000 Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) workers at the company's facilities in Bidadi, which lies, as does Narasapura, on the outskirts of Bengaluru (Bangalore), Karnataka's largest city and capital.

## The TKM autoworkers' strike and Maruti Suzuki

The state government has denounced the strike as a threat to investment and repeatedly ordered the TKM workers to return to work on the company's terms. These include a 25 percent increase in monthly output from 80,000 to 100,000 vehicles per month. Last week, Karnataka Chief Minister B. S. Yediyurappa and the state labour minister met with senior TKM executives to plot their next moves to break the workers' resistance. According to news reports, they discussed the possible mass arrest of strike leaders and an ultimatum to the workers to return to work or be fired.

The majority Toyota-owned TKM is adamant that the plant be made "globally competitive" so as to ensure that investors reap the full rewards of a planned joint venture with India's largest carmaker, Maruti Suzuki. Also a Japanese subsidiary, Maruti Suzuki plans to invest up to \$1 billion in the Bidadi assembly plant as part of a global restructuring of the auto industry at the workers' expense.

Speaking to an online business conference late last month, Maruti Suzuki India Chairman R.C. Bhargava said that the sole focus of Indian government policy should be on making industry more competitive. He boasted that Maruti Suzuki has been able to boost output each year without hiring more workers.

In 2012, the Congress Party state government of Haryana, the police, the courts and the Maruti Suzuki management launched a legal vendetta against workers at the company's Manesar, Haryana assembly plant, who had spearheaded working class resistance to precarious contract labour jobs and brutal working conditions in one of north India's largest industrial belts. After a company-provoked altercation, during which a fire gutted part of the plant, police arrested hundreds of workers on frame-up

charges, on the basis of lists of “suspects” supplied by management. The company then purged 2,400 permanent and contract workers and reopened a little more than a month later with phalanxes of police deployed inside and outside the factory.

Thirteen workers, including the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, which workers had formed in 2011 in a revolt against a pro-company union, were ultimately jailed for life after a kangaroo-court trial on trumped-up murder charges. They remain in prison to this day.

The Karnataka Employers’ Association has been pressing for the BJP government to violently suppress the TKM workers’ struggle, beginning with the “arrest of troublemakers.” In a November 30 letter to the state government, it shrilly complained that this “illegal agitation” is scaring off investors and threatens to spread and “totally vitiate... industrial relations in the entire area.”

### **The Karnataka transport strike**

Big-business fears of an upsurge in class struggle are now being realized.

The day before the altercation at Wistron, tens of thousands of bus drivers and conductors employed by four Karnataka government-owned transport companies, including the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation, launched a strike to demand that they be classified as government employees. By changing their status, they hope to make it more difficult to gut their jobs and conditions through privatization, and to obtain the better pay and job security guarantees that workers directly employed by the state government enjoy. The workers are also demanding compensation for the families of the nearly 50 workers who have died of COVID-19 as a result of being forced to work amid the pandemic and without proper personal protective equipment.

The strike developed outside of and in opposition to the unions, most importantly the Stalinist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), long the dominant force among Karnataka transport workers.

The BJP state government is threatening to invoke the draconian Essential Services Maintenance Act to criminalize the strike, and to mobilize private bus operators to ply the routes shut down by the strike. But on the weekend, its efforts appear to have largely focussed on seeking to enlist the unions’ support in bringing the strike to an end.

The government has accused a farmers’ organization, the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), and its president, Kodihalli Chandrashekar, hardly a radical, of “instigating” the transport workers’ strike. Workers and farmers organized under the banner of the KRRS mounted a joint protest in Bengaluru on Thursday.

The next day, the striking TKM workers also held a protest with farmers in the state capital.

### **The November 26 all-India general strike and the farmers’ agitation**

These actions follow on from the November 26 one-day general strike in which tens of millions of workers across India walked off the job to protest the Modi government’s big business socioeconomic policies, including its three pro-corporate farm “reform” laws, and to demand emergency relief for the hundreds of millions whom the government and India’s ruling elite have left to fend for themselves amid the pandemic and India’s worst ever economic contraction.

That same day, farmers launched their *Dilli Chalo* (Let’s go to Delhi)

agitation. Through massive state repression—including the deployment of paramilitary forces, tear gas and water cannon attacks, and the placing of the entire state of Haryana under Section 144 orders, prohibiting all gatherings of more than four people—Modi and his BJP succeeded in preventing the farmers from reaching Delhi as planned on November 27. But defying the police gauntlet, tens of thousands of farmers, principally from the northwestern states of Punjab and Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, did make it to the borders of the Delhi National Capital Territory.

The number of farmers and farm family members amassed at Delhi’s border points has since swelled to more than 350,000. The BJP government having offered no more than cosmetic changes to the farm laws, the farmers are vowing to step up their protests beginning today.

These developments attest to the breadth of the popular opposition to the Modi government and to a growing sense of social solidarity. They also constitute a challenge to the entire ruling class, which brought the would-be Hindu “strongman” Modi and his far-right BJP to power six years ago so as to intensify their drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capital and advance their great-power ambitions on the world stage, principally by integrating New Delhi even more fully into Washington’s strategic offensive against China.

The protest movement is also cutting across the BJP’s incessant campaign to whip up anti-Muslim communalism so as to divide the working class. Not coincidentally, the same week working class anger erupted in Karnataka, the BJP-dominated lower house of the state legislature passed a Hindu fundamentalist Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Bill, which will be used to harass Muslims, Dalits and other minorities.

The Indian strikes and worker protests and the farmers’ agitation are part of a worldwide growth of class struggle—spanning from Greece, Italy and France to Chile, Nigeria, South Korea and the US—fueled by the mercenary response of the world’s rival national capitalist elites to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have systematically prioritized profits over human life and are exploiting the social crisis produced by the pandemic to dramatically intensify the decades-long assault on worker rights, public services and jobs. Their aim is to make working people pay for the unlimited sums governments and central banks have funnelled into the markets to prop up the fortunes of the financial oligarchy and the profits of big business.

Everywhere the central question is that of arming the incipient global upsurge of the working class with a socialist internationalist program: breaking the political hold of the pro-capitalist trade unions, the establishment “left” parties and their pseudo-left accomplices, which have suppressed and sabotaged the struggles of the working class for decades; and forging an alternative revolutionary working class leadership.

The BJP government has been pushed onto the back foot. But the political forces that claim to speak in the name of the Indian working class—most importantly the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, and their respective trade union affiliates, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and the AITUC—are doing everything they can to demobilize and politically smother the working class.

When the farmers called for a *Bharat Bandh* (all-India shutdown) last Tuesday, the Stalinist parties and the unions instructed workers to remain on the job. This goes hand in hand with their efforts to divert the mass opposition to Modi behind the right-wing opposition parties, first and foremost the Congress Party. That is the party that, till recently, was the preferred governing party of the Indian ruling class and that long spearheaded the implementation of pro-investor policies and its pursuit of a “global strategic partnership” with Washington.

What the Stalinists are above all determined to prevent is the working class intervening as an independent political force, using the crisis the farmer protests have provoked to fight for its own class demands and

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 and animate the fight to fuse the struggles of Indian workers with their class brothers and sisters around the world.



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