Indian government and big business fear farmers' protest could trigger eruption of working class opposition

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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In the face of mass and escalating opposition from farmers, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government are doubling down on their drive to implement a raft of pro-corporate agricultural "reforms."

Farmer leaders have vowed that as of today, the 22nd day of their Delhi *Chalo* (Let's go to Delhi) protest, they will block the Chilla border between the Delhi National Capital Territory and Noida in Uttar Pradesh (UP). They have also announced they will hold rallies in major cities across the country, beginning in Kolkata today and Mumbai on December 22.

More than 300,000 farmers, their wives and children are currently camped on the outskirts of Delhi. Many have been there since November 27, when the BJP government deployed paramilitaries, tear gas and water cannon to prevent them from bringing their protest to India's capital and largest city.

Police in Haryana, which borders Delhi on three sides, say the situation is becoming increasingly "unsustainable," indicating preparations are underway for a possible further violent state assault.

Clashes erupted on the Delhi-Jaipur highway on Monday when police tried to stop some farmers from Haryana from making their way to the national capital on tractors. NDTV reported around 20 people were briefly detained by police before being released.

The agitation has been spearheaded by farmers from Punjab, Haryana, and western UP. But the longer it has continued, the more their ranks have been swelled by farmers from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and even more far-flung states.

Under conditions in which COVID-19 continues to spread widely throughout India, the Modi government has intentionally created a hygiene crisis at the protest sites, by reducing the water supply for washrooms and toilets.

Big business, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly impatient for the protests to end. A number of important business organizations are complaining that the agitation has disrupted shipments of raw materials and finished goods, and forced production cuts in Haryana.

The determination among the farmers and their supporters to force the repeal of the three pro- agribusiness laws that the BJP government rammed through Parliament in September is strong. According to press reports, a leader of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), one of the principal farm groups leading the protests, was forced to resign this week after he advocated farmers accept a settlement under which the laws would remain, in exchange for a government commitment to maintain the minimum price support system.

Mirchilal Saroj, a 32-year-old Dalit farmer from Madhya Pradesh, told Firstpost.com, "The farmers' protests are completely justified. The government," he continued, "will have to take these laws back. The crop that we sow and reap with our blood, sweat and tears, we don't get the right price for it even now. But at least earlier, there was the guarantee of a minimum price."

Modi and his BJP government are determined to enforce the legislation so as to open up India's farming sector to major domestic and international agribusiness interests.

However, the greatest concern and fear of the government and the Indian ruling class, at this point, is that if the BJP is perceived to have backed down before the farmers it will serve to intensify and broaden the already swelling working class opposition to the Modi government and its "pro investor" agenda.

On November 26, tens of millions of workers across India joined a one-day general strike to oppose the BJP government's social incendiary big business policies and demand emergency support for the hundreds of millions the government has left to fend for themselves amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the severest ever contraction in the Indian economy. In the southern state of the Karnataka, recent days have seen an eruption of working class anger. This includes strikes by auto workers employed by Toyota's Indian subsidiary and public sector bus drivers and conductors. Last Saturday, workers angered by months of unpaid wages and savage pay cuts of up to 45 percent rioted against Taiwan-based manufacturer Wistron. (See: As farmers intensify protests in north India, working-class anger erupts in Karnataka in the south)

Yesterday, more than 5,000 nurses and paramedic staff at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences' Delhi campus, one of India's premier medical institutes, launched an indefinite strike to protest the government's failure to address "long pending" complaints over wages and working conditions. They returned to work Tuesday after the Delhi High Court ruled their action illegal.

Speaking last Saturday to the annual general meeting of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), India's premier big business association, Modi insisted

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that the farm laws will not be repealed. The ardent Hindu supremacist and would-be authoritarian despot said he leads a "strong government" with a "mandate" for the measures.

The reforms, Modi cynically claimed, are aimed at helping the farmers. "All this is directed," he declared, at making "the farmer prosperous, as prosperous farmer(s) means (a) prosperous nation."

This is a pack of lies. The same rhetoric about "prosperity" has been used by governments for the past thirty years, including those led by the opposition Congress Party, to justify the implementation of pro-investor policies that have turned India into one of the most unequal countries in the world. For farmers and the landless rural poor, this has resulted in mounting indebtedness, poverty, and joblessness.

The farm bills are just one element in what Modi has termed a "quantum jump" in further "pro-investor" reforms. These include plans to privatize most Public Sector Units, including much of India's coal industry and railway network; the pro-corporate farm laws; and a "labour reform," also passed in the Monsoon session of Parliament. The latter further expands precarious contract labour employment, enables large employers to dismiss workers and close plants at will, and makes most worker job action illegal.

This onslaught is hitting workers, farmers, and the rural poor amid an unprecedented social crisis triggered by the government's disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. India has registered over 140,000 deaths from the virus, and hundreds of millions have lost their jobs or had their wages or, in the case of hawkers and artisans, their meagre earnings slashed.

The talks the government has held and continues to hold out to the farmer organisations are a charade. The BJP leadership and big business are adamant that capitalist restructuring must be accelerated.

Modi hopes to dissipate the protests by concocting a deal that can win over a portion of the farmer groups, whose leadership is primarily drawn from the better-off farmers. At the same time, the government continues to prepare for ruthless repression behind the scenes. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has been conspicuously present at all meetings of the most senior BJP leaders on the farmers' agitation.

With the aim of justifying future repression, government representatives continue to malign the protesting farmers, with claims that their agitation has been inspired by China and Pakistan, or has been infiltrated by Naxhalites (Maoists) and other "anti-national" elements.

A senior government source told the *Indian Express* December 15 that "back-channel talks" are ongoing with some of the farmers' groups. "Some leaders are willing to understand the need for arriving at a middle path," the source told the *Express*. Adding that others are sticking to a "maximalist position," he said, "but a solution may be in the offing."

After meeting with 10 right-wing farmers' organizations that have indicated their support for the government's laws in a memorandum, Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar stated Monday the government is ready for clause by clause discussions of the farm laws with "genuine" farmers' organizations.

If the government retains the ability to maneuver in the face of an explosion of popular opposition, it is above all due to the actions of the organizations that claim to speak in the name of the working class—the pro-capitalist trade unions and the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and Communist Party of India (CPI).

The Stalinists are doing everything they can to demobilise the working class, while using the influence they have among a section of the farmers to urge them to limit their opposition to vain appeals to the BJP to change course, as exemplified by the declarations issued by the heads of the CPM and CPI last week that "politics" should be kept out of the movement. This goes alongside the CPM and CPI's efforts to divert the mass opposition to Modi and the BJP behind the Congress Party, long the Indian ruling class' preferred party of government, and various right-wing regional chauvinist and caste-ist parties like the Tamil Nadu-based DMK and the UP-based Samajwadi Party.

Above all the Stalinists are determined to prevent the working class from intervening in the social-political crisis as an independent political force, so as to provide leadership to the farmers and impoverished rural toilers and mobilize them in a political struggle against the Modi government and the capitalist profit system. The potential for such a development has been underscored by the rising tide of worker struggles.

On December 11, a joint platform of central trade unions, including the Congress Party-aligned Indian National Trade Union Congress and Stalinist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), issued a statement reiterating their "rock-like solidarity" with the farmers' struggle.

This is a fraud. The Congress and the Stalinists are collaborating to keep the workers away from the farmers' protests. They instructed workers to remain on the job during the *Bharat bandh*, the all-India shutdown the farmers' organisations called last week.

The isolation of the farmers will only embolden the most right-wing forces in demanding that their agitation be put down. In a December 12 editorial entitled "For farmers' future: India's big ticket dreams all hinge on reforms. Government must stay the course," the *Times of India* sought to paint the protesters as an insignificant minority from the Punjab. Expressing the fear that ceding ground to the farmers would encourage worker struggles against the government's pro-investor reforms, the editorial stated, "If the government backs down, then, it would signal that any reform effort in India can be sabotaged by some interest group's opposition."

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