

The Indian farmers' agitation and the socialist strategy of the working class

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The more than 3-week-long agitation mounted by hundreds of thousands of farmers on the outskirts of Delhi has highlighted and intensified the popular opposition of India's workers and toilers to Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

Rushed through parliament in September in conjunction with a sweeping attack on workers' rights, the Modi government's pro-agribusiness farm laws will put tens of millions of small and marginal farmers at the mercy of domestic and international agribusiness.

In keeping with the antidemocratic character of its agrarian "reform," the BJP government responded to the launching of the farmers' Delhi *Chalo* (Let's go to Delhi) agitation with mass repression. If Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, subsequently agreed to talks with protest leaders, it was only because tens of thousands of farmers defied the state security gauntlet (enforced with mass arrests, tear gas, and water cannon), made it to the borders of the National Capital Territory on Nov. 26–27, and camped themselves on the major routes into Delhi.

The talks are a government ploy. They are aimed at probing whether Modi and Shah can leverage differences between the more prosperous and marginal farmers, and at providing them with political cover for their preparations for further state violence.

Modi and the BJP government are adamant that they will not repeal the three farm laws. In this they have the full support of big business. India's corporate elite has long pressed for the restructuring of Indian agriculture at farmers' expense. But the greatest concern and fear of India's capitalist rulers is that a government retreat before the farmer protests would galvanize mass working-class opposition to the pro-investor policies implemented by Modi and every government for the past three decades. "If the government backs down," exclaimed the *Times of India* last week, "it would signal that any reform effort in India can be sabotaged by some interest group's opposition."

It is imperative that the working class intervene in this crisis as an independent force.

The Socialist Equality Party—the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—calls on Indian workers to assert their industrial and independent political power and rally the rural masses, above all the agricultural workers and landless farmers, under their leadership and on the basis of a socialist program to fight the Modi government and bourgeois rule.

The working class must be mobilised in a political general strike to bring down the Modi government. The huge growth in social struggles over the past year—including the mass protests against the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act, the participation of tens of millions in the Jan. 8 and Nov. 26 one-day all-India protest strikes, and the current wave of strikes and struggles against speed-up and wage cuts and for COVID-19 personal protective equipment—demonstrates the enormous potential for a working class-led offensive.

The Modi government must not be allowed to succeed in its schemes to isolate, wear down, and split the farmers, all the while preparing to

forcibly evict them. The government's foul attempts to depict the farmers' agitation as infiltrated, if not animated, by "antinational" forces (whether it be China, Pakistan, the Naxhalites or Khalistanis), and the visible presence of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh at the government's key deliberations on the farmers' agitation underscore that its preparations for a violent crackdown are far advanced.

The Indian ruling class and the COVID-19 pandemic

The Modi government and the Indian ruling class are presiding over a social catastrophe. The farm laws are part of a much broader class-war assault aimed at making the working class and rural masses pay for their ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and for the systemic world capitalist crisis, which erupted prior to the pandemic and has been enormously exacerbated by it.

First, the Modi government, without forewarning or planning, imposed a lockdown that manifestly failed to stop the virus's spread. Then, seeking to exploit the misery created by its failure to provide social support to the hundreds of millions who had been deprived of any income overnight, it launched a reckless back-to-work drive that has resulted in mass death.

In the name of reviving India's economy from its severest-ever economic contraction, the BJP government is implementing what Modi has termed a quantum jump in "pro-investor" reforms. It has announced plans to privatize most Public Sector Units, including much of the coal industry, railway network, and bank sector; enacted the pro-corporate farm laws; and implemented a labour law "reform" that further expands precarious contract labour employment, empowers large employers to dismiss workers and close plants at will, and makes most worker job action illegal.

At the same time, the Modi government has integrated India still more fully into Washington's strategic offensive against China, dramatically expanding military-security ties with the US and its principal Asia-Pacific partners, Japan and Australia. The Indian elite is trying to exploit the explosive US-China conflict to further its great-power ambitions, but also with the aim of enlisting Washington and Tokyo's support in making India an alternate production chain hub to China.

The Modi government has responded to the pandemic by doubling down on the two principal components of the Indian bourgeoisie's class strategy since 1991: the drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capitalism; and the pursuit of closer ties with US imperialism, and since 2005, an Indo-US "global strategic partnership." The former has resulted in India being transformed into one of the world's most unequal societies—a society in which the richest one percent own four times more wealth than the poorest 70 percent of Indians, hundreds of millions of whom are destitute and malnourished. The latter has transformed India

into a frontline state in Washington's incendiary war drive against China.

Well aware that the pursuit of this agenda will meet with ever-greater popular opposition, the BJP, with the connivance of the police, Supreme Court and India's ruling elite as a whole, is relentlessly stoking communal reaction. Its aim is to split the working class and mobilise its fascistic Hindu supremacist followers as shock troops against its opponents, above all the working class.

The perfidious role of the Stalinist CPM and its Left Front

The expansion of Indian capitalism over the past three decades has resulted in a vast increase in the size and social power of the working class. Yet despite innumerable militant struggles, including by workers employed in auto and other globally integrated industries, the working class has been politically marginalized and gagged.

For this, the organizations that falsely 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) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—are principally responsible.

Long integrated into the political establishment, they have systematically suppressed the class struggle and directly participated in the imposition of the bourgeoisie's agenda, from the adoption of pro-investor reforms to a military build-up that has given India the world's third largest military budget.

For three decades, the CPM and CPI have invoked the threat from the Hindu right to justify their propping up a succession of right-wing governments, most of them Congress Party-led. By preventing the working class from advancing its own socialist solution to the social crisis, the Stalinists have enabled the Hindu right to exploit mounting social frustration and anger over endemic poverty, mass joblessness, and ever-widening social inequality to emerge as a mortal menace to the working class.

Yet for the Stalinists, the manifest failure of their policy is a matter of complete indifference. They have responded to the bourgeoisie's embrace of the Hindu supremacist Modi and the intensification of its class-war assault by redoubling their efforts to tie the working class to the Congress and a host of right-wing ethno-chauvinist and caste-ist parties, and to the institutions of the capitalist state. The CPM and their Left Front allies promote the Congress, the courts, and "our army" as "secular, democratic" bulwarks against "Hindutva-ite fascism," even as they connive with it at every turn, from the constitutional coup against Kashmir to the erection of a Ram Temple on the site of the razed *Babri Masjid*.

Through the Jan. 8 and Nov. 26 general strikes, India's workers and toilers voiced their anger and opposition to the Modi government and the ruinous outcome of three decades of pro-investor reform. But for the Stalinists and their union affiliates, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), they were a sordid political maneuver. A means to contain an increasingly rebellious working class and to boost the "progressive" credentials of their right-wing "anti-BJP" allies, particularly the Congress and DMK, whose union fronts are prominent members of the CITU/AITUC-led Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions.

The Stalinists' response to the farmers' agitation is entirely in keeping with their role as political agents of the bourgeoisie. They are seeking to reduce the working class to a passive bystander, while issuing joint statements with the Congress Party, till recently the ruling class's preferred party of government, and the Congress-affiliated Indian National Trades Union Congress that profess support for the farmers. Underscoring their implacable opposition to the working class intervening as an

independent political force and rallying the rural toilers against the Modi government and Indian capitalism, both CPM General-Secretary Sitaram Yechury and CPI head D. Raja have said that the farmers' agitation must remain "non-political."

A socialist-internationalist program to fight Modi and the profit system

To prevail against Modi and the Indian bourgeoisie, the Indian working class must politically and organizationally break with the Stalinist parties and the unions and make a socialist internationalist strategy based on the programme of Permanent Revolution the axis of its struggles. First elaborated by Leon Trotsky, Permanent Revolution served as the strategic foundation for the 1917 Russian Revolution and the subsequent struggle against its Stalinist degeneration. It demonstrated that in countries of belated capitalist development like India, the basic tasks of the democratic revolution, such as the resolution of the agrarian problem, can only be realized through a working class-led socialist revolution and as part of the global struggle against capitalism.

As forewarned by Trotsky and the Fourth International, the Indian bourgeoisie, under the political leadership of Nehru, Gandhi and their Indian National Congress, betrayed the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed South Asia in the first half of the 20th century and reached revolutionary dimensions between 1942 and 1947. The Congress leaders made a deal with British imperialism under which the subcontinent was bloodily partitioned into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. They assumed control of the British colonial state machine and stabilized capitalist rule. More than seven decades on, India is blighted by a deep-rooted agrarian crisis, caste oppression, endemic poverty, and brutal sweatshop capitalist oppression, and has as its prime minister a Hindu-supremacist gangster.

India's workers must unite their myriad social struggles and forge themselves into an independent political force that rallies the rural toilers against Modi and Indian capitalism in the fight for a workers' government. In this struggle, the working class must implacably oppose Hindu supremacism, caste-ism and caste oppression, and all the communal and ethnic divisions the ruling class incites to divide the working class and harness it to its factional struggles for power and privilege.

Only a socialist program can provide a solution to the burning problems of the farmers, and of the landless and agricultural workers, who comprise the majority of the rural masses. At every point, the measures that are urgently needed to secure a decent livelihood for the agricultural workers, those employed in public work schemes such as the MGNREG, and marginal farmers, and to ensure that all working farmers have access to cheap credit, farm machinery and agricultural inputs, clash with the capitalist profit system. They require a vast expansion of public services, the nationalization of the land, the promotion of large-scale collective agriculture, and the placing of the banks, fertilizer and agricultural implement manufacturers under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

Above all, Indian workers must fight to fuse their struggle with the growing global upsurge of the working class. As 2020 comes to a close, working-class resistance to the capitalist elite's mercenary response to the COVID-19 pandemic and decades of attacks on jobs, public services and democratic rights is mounting. Strikes and mass protests have erupted in France, Greece, Italy, Chile, South Korea and the United States.

The watchword of the *Communist Manifesto*, "Workers of the World Unite!" was never more realizable or more urgent. The globalization of

production has intensified the inter-capitalist struggle, waged at the expense of working people, for markets, resources, pools of labour to exploit and geostrategic advantage. While the transnational corporations use the global labour market to drive down wages and working conditions, the imperialist and great powers, and various aspiring regional hegemony like India are arming to the teeth.

But the capitalist breakdown has also created the objective conditions for its progressive resolution in socialist revolution. Globalization has created vast new battalions of the working class in Asia, Africa and Latin America who are united with workers in North America, Europe and Japan through the process of production. When, as currently, workers at Toyota Kirloskar Motors defy government back-to-work orders in order to resist management's demand that they increase production by 25 percent, they are striking a blow not just for workers in India, but for autoworkers around the world.

This objective unity must become a conscious strategy. Workers in India must coordinate their struggles with their class brothers and sisters around the world in a global counteroffensive against capital's relentless assault on working people and the profit system as a whole.

The struggle for the international unity of the working class is inseparable from the struggle against war. India's workers and toilers must oppose the Indo-US anti-China war alliance and the ruling class's reactionary strategic conflict with Pakistan, both of which threaten to unleash a nuclear catastrophe. To the reactionary state system created by the 1947 Partition, which has served as a festering pool for communal conflict and national-ethnic antagonisms and a mechanism for continued imperialist domination, the working class must counterpose the struggle for the Socialist United States of South Asia.

To fight for this programme and provide leadership to the growing rebellion of India's workers and toilers, a revolutionary working-class party must be built—an Indian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). We urge all those ready to take up this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and the ICFI. We will lend you every support in this pivotal struggle.



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