

Indian farmers' agitation against Modi government's pro-agribusiness laws enters third month

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Farmers protesting against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's pro-agribusiness "reform" laws will hold a giant tractor rally in Delhi today to mark the country's January 26 Republic Day holiday.

The government had initially sought to have the protest declared illegal. But it backed down after India's Supreme Court refused its request for an injunction, out of fear such action would lead to a violent clash that would further fuel opposition to the Narendra Modi-led government and its rapacious pro-big business policies.

Nevertheless, in a show of force meant to intimidate the farmers and their supporters, the BJP government is deploying "five layer security" in and around India's capital today. The *Indian Express* reports Delhi police as saying that over 40,000 police and paramilitaries from the Delhi police, Indo-Tibetan Border Police and Central Reserve Police Force (CBRF) will be deployed at the Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur borders of the Delhi National Capital Territory.

Since November 26-27, when the government blocked their entry into Delhi with water cannon, tear gas and violent police charges, hundreds of thousands of farmers have been camped at the borders of India's capital.

Now entering its third month, the farmers' agitation has compounded the enormous social and political crisis facing the Modi regime and the Indian ruling elite as a whole. The ruling class' catastrophic handling of the coronavirus pandemic has resulted in more than 150,000 official COVID-19 deaths—although the real number is undoubtedly far higher—and the biggest economic contraction in modern Indian history.

The greatest fear of the Hindu supremacist BJP government, no less than its establishment political opponents, is that the farmers' agitation will become the catalyst for a broader social movement led by the working class and embracing the agricultural workers and landless, who comprise the majority of the rural masses.

Working class struggles have already erupted across India against the Modi government's IMF-lauded pro-investor economic restructuring program, and to demand financial support for the hundreds of millions who have lost jobs and/or income during the pandemic. These include two one-day general strikes last year in which tens of millions participated. In a struggle that exemplifies the growing militancy within the working class, 3,000 Toyota workers employed at a facility near Bangalore have defied

a Karnataka BJP state government back-to-work order to resist the auto giant's speed-up plans.

In tandem with his government's economic reforms, which are aimed at intensifying the exploitation of the working class and making India global capital's alternate cheap labour production-chain hub to China, Modi has moved to strengthen India's military-strategic partnership with US imperialism.

The three pro-agribusiness laws were rammed through parliament last September during the same session as the Modi government amended the country's labour laws to expand the already ubiquitous use of contract labour, allow large companies to lay off workers at will, and illegalise most strikes and other worker job actions.

The 11th round of talks between government representatives and farm union leaders abruptly ended on January 22 when the latter rejected the government's proposal to delay implementation of its farm laws for a period of 18 months.

Application of the laws had already been temporarily suspended by the Supreme Court as part of a ruse to get the farmers to agree to submit their complaints to a Court-appointed panel of "experts" comprised entirely of supporters of the government's farm "reform" laws.

Rightly mistrustful of the government, the farmers have insisted that the three pro-agribusiness laws must be repealed and a legal guarantee given that the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system will not be dismantled.

The government, which has been adamant throughout that no more than minor and cosmetic changes can be made to the laws, first raised the possibility of their application being suspended for 18 months so as to permit negotiated changes at the 10th round of talks on January 20.

Some farmers' union leaders initially welcomed the government's initiative as "a very important development." However, they were forced to switch course due to farmers' determined opposition. Prior to the meeting on the 22nd, the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), the umbrella body of farmer/peasant unions, passed a resolution rejecting the government's offer. Harpal Singh, President of the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU), told the *Indian Express*, "Even if we accept the government's offer, our fellow brothers sitting at Delhi borders will not accept anything other than a repeal of the laws. They will

not spare us.”

The farmers participating in the agitation at Delhi’s borders have braved brutal police repression, extremely cold weather conditions, and the threat of COVID-19. To date, more than 140 farmers have died.

The Modi government initially branded today’s tractor rally as a conspiracy to trigger violent disturbances and sully India’s reputation. But the Supreme Court refused to outlaw the rally.

“The police is the first authority to decide who should be allowed to enter Delhi,” said the Court at a January 18 hearing. “We are not going to tell you what you should do.”

India’s highest court has facilitated the BJP government’s assault on democratic rights—most notoriously in its constitutional coup against Kashmir—and in its promotion of Hindu supremacism. But during the farmers’ agitation it has attempted to strike a pose of independence, hoping thereby to assist the government and India’s capitalists in defusing the crisis.

After failing to prevail on the farmers to remain outside of Delhi for Republic Day, the Delhi police force—which is under the direct authority of Amit Shah, India’s Home Minister and Modi’s chief henchman—finally agreed on Saturday to allow protesting farmers to enter the capital and hold “*Kisan Gantantra* Day (Peasant Republic Day).” However, they imposed strict restrictions so that the tractor rally will not disrupt the government’s official Republic Day parade. The farmers’ unions have agreed to these conditions.

According to the general secretary of the Punjab Jamhoori Kisan Sabha, Kulwant Singh Sandhu, today’s protest parade will involve 250,000-300,000 tractors.

While forced to give up its attempt to illegalize today’s protest, the Modi government is continuing to prepare the groundwork for mass repression.

On January 17, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) summoned Baldev Singh Sirsa, a protest leader and the president of Lok Bhalai Insaf Welfare Society, in connection with a case registered against Gupatwant Singh Pannu, the leader of Sikhs for Justice, a US-based organisation that is banned in India. Around 40 other people who have supported the farmers’ agitation in various ways were also called for questioning by the NIA. This is part of the government’s ongoing effort to tar the protests by claiming that they have been infiltrated or are even being led by Khalistanis (Sikh separatists). Their aim is to libel the agitation as treasonous so as to prepare the ground for its violent repression.

On January 22, protesting farmers camped at Singhu on the Delhi-Haryana border captured a man who publicly confessed at a press conference called by the farmers’ unions to be a part of a 10-member team trained by a police officer to incite violence during today’s tractor rally. The disturbances would then be exploited by the police as a pretext to justify ruthless repression against the protesters.

However, after the farmers handed him over to the police, the Haryana police turned the story upside down. They claimed that the man had been forced to make his confession out of fear. Anyone familiar with the long-standing brutality of the Indian police will treat this claim with extreme scepticism. The incident is merely the latest indication of how the authorities are using every trick in the book, including encouraging far-right forces, to

suppress the farmers’ protest.

The Modi government’s conspiracies to break the farmers’ agitation, whether by wearing it down through talks designed to go nowhere, or state repression, are being facilitated by the farmers’ organisations and the Stalinist political parties and trade unions.

They are working to isolate the farmers’ agitation from the struggles of broader layers of workers and the impoverished masses. The farmers’ unions have refused to make any broader social appeal, refusing to raise any demands on behalf of the agricultural workers and landless, and insisting that their movement is “non-political.”

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and their unions claim to support the farmers. But in fact they are doing everything to keep the working class on the sidelines and to prevent it from intervening in the crisis as an independent political force rallying the rural toilers on the basis of a socialist program against the Modi government and Indian capitalism.

Throughout the farmers’ agitation, the CPM and CPI have been closely coordinating their actions in “support” of the farmers with the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government. This is part of their broader effort to derail the growing mass opposition to the Modi government, by politically harnessing it to the Congress and other right-wing opposition parties.

In an interview with the *Hindu* published on December 28, CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury pointed out how his party is collaborating with Congress and other opposition parties to push the agitating farmers into futile talks with the Modi government. “As far as the Opposition is concerned,” said Yechury, “eleven parties have come together, we met the President of India. We are only saying that repeal these laws, then sit with all stakeholders, the *kisans* [farmers] and let your corporate friends also come, have a discussion. On the basis of this discussion, you formulate new bills. This is the most reasonable and democratic way of going about it.”

What the Stalinists are promoting as an “alternative” to the Modi government’s farm laws is nothing of the sort. If the CPM’s new bills must be acceptable to Modi’s “corporate friends” and the farmers, they will inevitably uphold the interests of the very same agribusiness firms that the farmers have sacrificed so much to oppose.

Rejecting the treacherous role played by the Stalinists, the Indian working class must independently intervene with their own socialist strategy as elaborated in the December 22 statement “The Indian farmers’ agitation and the socialist strategy of the working class.”



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