

Modi regime steps up repression of farmers opposing its pro-agribusiness laws

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“There were several layers of security,” noted an *Indian Express* report: “two heavy layers of metal barricading (along with spools of razor wire); a layer of large stone boulders; followed by a layer of (more than 2,000) nails (embedded on the road) and a layer of concrete barricades. A few meters ahead of that was another layer of stone boulders, followed by yet another layer of concrete barricades after a few meters.”

Anyone thinking that this was a description of a war zone would be badly mistaken. The report describes just one element in the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government’s mounting campaign of repression against farmers who are encamped on the borders of India’s capital, Delhi, as part of a protest against its pro-agribusiness farm laws.

In an effort to force an end to the two-and-a-half month agitation, the authorities are working to confine tens of thousands of farmers—some reports place the numbers in excess of 200,000—to what are effectively now open-air prisons.

The protesting farmers are demanding the repeal of the three farm laws that the BJP government rammed through parliament in September, at the same time as it amended the labor code to legalize most strikes and promote a “hire and fire,” “flexible” labour market.

The three farm laws will pave the way for domestic and international agribusiness companies to dominate India’s agricultural sector. The farmers, the majority of whom struggle to support their families on plots of 2 hectares (5 acres) or less, rightly fear that their livelihoods are threatened and that the government is intent on abolishing India’s Minimum Support Price system.

The BJP government has surrounded the farmers’ camp sites on the outskirts of Delhi, particularly the three largest, situated at the Singhu, Ghazipur and Tikri border crossings, with war-like barricades, manned by huge numbers of police. Heavy security deployments block access roads into the national capital, as well as access to nearby amenities.

On Thursday, police prevented 15 opposition MPs from visiting the farmer protest encampment at the Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh/Delhi border crossing.

“Farmers are barricaded behind fortress-like concrete barriers and barbed wire fencing,” tweeted one MP, Harsimrat Kaur Badal. “Even ambulances and fire brigades cannot enter the protest site.” A leader of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Badal served in Modi’s cabinet until the Punjab-based SAD withdrew from the

government to protest the farm laws.

“The impression we got at the Delhi Ghazipur border is like the border between India and Pakistan,” the 15 MPs subsequently wrote in a letter of protest to the speaker of the lower house of parliament. “The condition of farmers resembles that of prisoners in jail.”

This vicious state repression has been ordered by the Delhi police, which is under the direct control of Modi’s chief henchman, the Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah, and supported by the BJP governments in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, the two states that encircle India’s National Capital Territory.

Referring to the thousands of nails placed on roadways to puncture the tires of vehicles coming from Haryana, Sudesh Goyat, a protesting farmer, told the *Express*, “I call what they’ve created here a ‘China wall’ (Great Wall of China.) Are they so scared of farmers?” Commenting on the brutal intent behind the barricades, he added, “My biggest concern is they have not left any room for an ambulance to pass through.”

According to another *Express* report, the barricades have cut off the farmers’ access to roughly 100 portable toilets. The BBC reported, “All roads going from UP [Uttar Pradesh] to Delhi have been closed. Even the walkways and footpaths have been blocked.”

The Modi government has also ordered the shutoff of electricity and water supplies to the agitation sites. Municipal workers have been instructed to stop collecting garbage, leading to mounting piles of waste at the protest sites.

In tandem with its massive security buildup, the BJP government has adopted a more aggressive political posture. It has said any further meetings with farm union leaders are dependent on their abandoning their demand for the repeal of the three pro-corporate farm laws; and, contrary to media expectations, included no measures to placate farmers in Monday’s 2021–2022 budget.

Both domestic and international capital are adamant that the Modi government must implement its farm laws and quicken the pace of pro-market reforms, so as to enhance the profitability of Indian capitalism. Last month, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) endorsed Modi’s pro-agribusiness laws, calling them a “significant step forward.” The S&P credit-rating agency, for its part, is threatening to slash India’s rating to junk-bond status if it retreats on the laws’ implementation.

The new Joe Biden-led US administration has also voiced its support. “The United States welcomes steps that would improve

the efficiency of India's markets and attract greater private sector investment," said a State Department spokesperson Wednesday.

The Modi government's greatest fear is that the farmers' agitation will become a catalyst for a broader working-class-led movement against its pro-investor economic reforms and associated austerity measures. Tens of millions of workers joined two one-day general strikes during 2020 against the government's economic onslaught on working people, including privatizations and the promotion of contract labour. The second of these strikes occurred on November 26, the same day that the farmers launched their *Delhi Chalo* (Let's go to Delhi) agitation. By means of a massive mobilisation of police and security forces, the Modi government prevented the farmers from entering Delhi, forcing them to establish the camps where they remain to this day.

The Modi government seized on clashes between the farmers and police during a January 26 Republic Day protest in Delhi to justify the latest round of repression. Cynically claiming it was protecting "public safety," the authorities shut off mobile phone and internet services in the outskirts of Delhi and adjacent areas of UP and Haryana after January 26. The BJP-ruled state government in Haryana subsequently extended the suspension of mobile services till 5 p.m. February 4 in seven of the state's 22 districts.

The Delhi police have filed 44 criminal cases and arrested 122 people in relation to the "violence" on January 26. The police have also filed cases of "rioting, attempted murder and criminal conspiracy" against at least 37 farmers' union leaders and activists, including Medha Patkar and Yogendra Yadav, alleging they made "inflammatory speeches" and were "involved in the violence."

More than half a dozen journalists who covered the January 26 demonstration have also been targeted with baseless charges. In a statement on February 2, Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, urged the Indian authorities to drop the charges against the journalists, which include "sedition, promoting communal disharmony and making statements prejudicial to national integration." Ganguly noted that the government is focused on "discrediting peaceful protesters, harassing critics of the government and prosecuting those reporting on the events."

The government is particularly worried about media reports that exposed the police's gunning down of a protesting farmer who was driving a tractor during the January 26 rally. At least six senior journalists and editors from BJP-ruled states, together with a prominent Congress Party politician, Shashi Tharoor, are facing sedition charges for allegedly "misreporting" the facts concerning the death of the protester.

On January 30, Delhi police also detained two journalists, Dharmender Singh and Mandeep Punia, who were covering the protests, alleging that they "misbehaved" towards the police. Punia, a freelance journalist, was deliberately targeted for his reports on a BJP-sponsored mob that threw stones at the farmers and vandalized their tents, while police stood by, at the protest site on the Singhu border between Delhi and Haryana on January 29. The police released Singh the next day, but they have sent Punia to judicial custody for 14 days for allegedly obstructing and assaulting a police officer.

The government repression has prompted other farmers to join

the protest. Media reports have noted that thousands of farmers, including large contingents of women, have arrived at the protest sites in Haryana. On Monday night, the farmers blocked the Jind-Chandigarh highway at Kandela village in protest at the suspension of internet services, which has disrupted their children's studies.

Addressing a press conference at the Singhu border on February 2, farmer union leaders announced that farmers will carry out a nationwide three-hour "chakka jam," a blockade of national and state highways, today to protest the suspension of internet services and the harassment of protesters by the authorities.

With the political crisis for the ruling elite triggered by the farmers' protest showing no signs of abating, the opposition Congress Party is endeavouring to defuse tensions. Punjab's Congress Party Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh called February 2 for an "all-party conference" to seek the "immediate withdrawal of farm laws."

A statement issued by the Punjab Congress government after the meeting, which was boycotted by the BJP and Delhi's ruling Aam Aadmi Party, appealed for an "early resolution of the crisis." Making clear that his main concern was to avoid a social explosion, the chief minister added, "We have to work to resolve this issue before things go out of hand."

Congress is fully committed to pro-investor economic reforms, of which the Modi government's farm laws are a part. It was a Congress Party government that in the early 1990s initiated the drive to make India a centre of cheap-labour production and services for global capital; and it led the United Progressive Alliance government that during its decade in office (2004–2014) pressed forward with a raft of neo-liberal "reforms," while forging an Indo-US "global strategic partnership" with Washington.

Over the past three decades, Congress Party-led governments repeatedly sought to introduce pro-agribusiness measures akin to those now championed by Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, but backed down for fear of mass opposition.

On Wednesday, at the request of 16 opposition parties, the Modi government agreed to hold 15 hours of discussion on the farm laws in parliament. Given that the Modi government has repeatedly insisted that it will not repeal the farm laws, this manoeuvre amounts to an attempt to provide the government and opposition parties with some "democratic" cover and the opportunity to pose as friends of the farmers while doing nothing to endanger the reforms.



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