

As farmers expand their agitation, Indian government intensifies repression

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Pushed on the back foot by the popular support for the farmers' agitation against its pro-agribusiness farm laws, India's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is systematically intensifying state repression against protesters and their supporters.

Since late November, tens of thousands of protesting farmers, principally from the nearby states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, have been encamped on the outskirts of the Delhi National Capital Territory. Their Delhi *Chalo* (Let's go to Delhi) protest, which is demanding the repeal of all three recently-enacted farm laws, was prevented from entering the capital by a massive police mobilisation organised by the Modi government.

During the first 75 days of the protest, over 200 farmers have died due to bitterly cold weather, accidents, and suicides.

The farm laws strengthen the domination of major domestic and international agribusiness concerns over India's agricultural sector, and all but abolish the minimum support price (MSP) guarantee for farmers' crops.

They are part of a battery of pro-investor reforms being implemented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Hindu supremacist BJP in order to boost the competitiveness of Indian capitalism, and intensify the exploitation of the working class and rural poor. The farm laws were passed in last September's session of parliament together with labour "reforms" that illegalize most strikes and promote precarious contract-labour jobs.

Under these conditions, the Modi government fears that the longer the farmers' protest goes on, the greater becomes the risk it could serve as the catalyst for the eruption of much broader social opposition to the Indian ruling elite's class war agenda. It is in this context that the right-wing BJP government has vastly expanded its vicious campaign of repression against the protesting farmers and their supporters, following their January 26 tractor rally in Delhi to mark Republic Day.

The Delhi police, which are directly controlled by Modi's chief henchman and Home Minister Amit Shah, have filed 44 First Information Reports (FIR) against hundreds of farmers and more than 40 farmer leaders, claiming they orchestrated mass "violence" on Republic Day. One hundred twenty-two farmers from Punjab and Haryana have been arrested.

The Modi government is also trying to disperse the tens of thousands of protesters who continue to camp at the protest sites by cutting their access to water, electricity and telecommunications. The police have put up several layers of "war zone-like" barricades to prevent the protesters from entering Delhi

and confine them to the protest sites.

The Modi government's repressive measures have thus far backfired. Tens of thousands of new protesters, including women, youth and students, have begun arriving at the protest sites to show their solidarity with those encamped on the outskirts of India's capital.

In a meeting held on February 10, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), the umbrella of farm unions which is leading the agitation, announced an expansion of the nationwide campaign to repeal the farm laws. Future actions to be taken by farmers include a several hours-long nationwide railway blockade on Thursday, February 18.

The *Indian Express* reported that Punjab's first *Kisan Mahapanchayat*, or great local farmer's gathering, held in Ludhiana's Jagraon sub-district on February 11 drew a "massive gathering of farmers" intent on showing their support for the ongoing agitation. Similar gatherings have taken place in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan over recent days.

Modi and his BJP government, which have incessantly sought to fan the flames of communalism by labelling the farmers' agitation as a subversive movement infiltrated, if not controlled, by Sikh separatists, have been shaken by this upsurge of popular support. On January 29, a 100,000-strong *Mahapanchayat* was held in Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, India's biggest state, which is ruled by BJP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a notorious Hindu communalist. In 2013, communal riots in Muzaffarnagar district resulted in the deaths of 42 Muslims and 20 Hindus, and left the area deeply divided on communal lines. Yet at the January 29 meeting, Muslims and Hindus jointly expressed their solidarity with the protesting farmers.

Speaking during the debate on the "Motion of Thanks" for President Kovind Nath's address to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's bicameral parliament, on February 8, Modi slandered the protesting farmers and their supporters, describing them as a new breed of "*andolan-jivi*" ("professional protesters") promoting a "new FDI or Foreign Destructive Ideology."

The Modi government has combined these vicious denunciations of the protesters with mounting state repression. Some of the most notable recent examples of this include:

- On February 13, a Delhi Police special cell arrested Disha Ravi, a 22-year-old student, and climate activist who helped found "Fridays For Future," and charged her with sedition. The basis for this draconian charge was the allegation that she disseminated "a

Google toolkit doc” related to the farmer protests in Delhi through social media sites. In a statement tweeted on Sunday, the Delhi Police accused Ravi of being “an editor” of the “toolkit” and a “key conspirator in (the) document’s formulation and dissemination.” The police also claim that Ravi, along with at least two others, “collaborated with pro-Khalistani Poetic Justice Foundation to spread disaffection against the Indian State.”

In a statement, the SKM condemned the arrest of Ravi and demanded her “immediate unconditional release.” The farmer union said this is “part of a wider pattern of intimidation” with the aim of discouraging people who are extending support to the farmers’ agitation. After appearing before a magistrate in Delhi, Ravi was remanded for five days under police custody.

- On February 4, the cyber-crime cell of the Delhi Police registered an FIR against “pro-Khalistan” creators of a “toolkit” on the farmer protests, accusing them of waging a “social, cultural and economic war against the Government of India.” The case against unnamed persons included charges of “sedition,” “criminal conspiracy,” and “promoting hatred.” The toolkit, to the government’s ire, was shared by climate activist Greta Thunberg, who has backed the farmers’ agitation on Twitter.

- On February 8, Reuters reported that India’s technology minister had asked social media platform Twitter to take down 1,178 Twitter accounts on the grounds they were spreading “misinformation” about the farmers’ protests. According to the news report, which quoted from a Technology Ministry source, New Delhi wrote to Twitter on February 4 demanding it remove the accounts, which it said were “backed by arch-rival Pakistan or operated by sympathizers of Sikhs.” Twitter subsequently responded by declaring that it had blocked access to 97 percent of the accounts the government had said were spreading “provocative content and misinformation.”

- Beginning on Tuesday February 9 and continuing through Sunday, February 14, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raided the residences of managers, editors and journalists of NewsClick.in, an independent media portal based in Delhi. As in many such raids targeting journalists and NGOs, the state authorities claimed their actions were linked to “money laundering cases.” But the raids were transparently an attempt to intimidate NewsClick, which has provided extensive, sympathetic coverage of the farmers’ agitation.

Despite the immense courage and personal sacrifices of the farmers in the face of this ruthless campaign of state repression, the politics of the farm unions—which are led by more prosperous, politically-connected farmers—are playing directly into the hands of Modi. Insisting that their movement is “non-political,” the unions have ruled out making any broader appeal to the mass opposition to the Modi government.

On February 14, the SKM held candlelit marches across the country, “remembering the sacrifice of the martyred soldiers” in the Pulwama bomb attack in 2019, with the apparent aim of

countering Modi and the BJP’s claims that their protest is “anti-national.” In the suicide bombing in Indian-held Kashmir, about 40 Indian security personnel were killed. Modi seized on the incident to ratchet up tensions with Pakistan, taking the two nuclear-armed powers to the brink of war. Moreover, the BJP exploited the incident to launch a bellicose, nationalist-communist election campaign that culminated in Modi’s reelection to a second term in office in May 2019. By commemorating this event, the farmers’ unions are directly strengthening the hand of Modi, the BJP, and the Hindu supremacist right.

The Stalinist parties, principally the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and Communist Party of India, and their affiliated trade unions are playing the decisive role in preventing the working class from intervening in the political crisis provoked by the farmers’ agitation and advancing a socialist program to rally the rural masses—above all the agricultural workers and marginal farmers—against the Modi government and Indian capitalism.

Despite swelling social anger among workers against the Modi government’s pro-corporate onslaught, which was underscored by the massive nationwide general strike that occurred the very same day the farmers’ agitation began, the CPM and CPI are doing everything in their power to keep the working class on the sidelines and prevent it from linking its struggles with the rural masses.

Instead, the Stalinists’ principal concern has been to subordinate the farmers’ protest to the opposition Congress Party, with which the CPM and CPI are politically aligned, and other right-wing opposition parties. Till recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government, the Congress long spearheaded the ruling elite’s pro-investor “reform” agenda and its drive to forge a close partnership with US imperialism. When it held power prior to 2014 it sought to impose similar pro-agribusiness reforms. Yet the Stalinists have closely coordinated their response to the farmers’ agitation with the Congress Party leadership, issuing hollow and hypocritical joint statements that denounce Modi and hail the farmers’ protests.



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