

Indian farmers' agitation against Modi's pro-agribusiness laws continues for fourth month

Wasantha Rupasinghe
15 March 2021

The agitation by hundreds of thousands of Indian farmers against the pro-agribusiness laws adopted by Narendra Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government is now well into its fourth month.

Tens of thousands of farmers and their supporters remain camped on the outskirts of the national capital Delhi, as they have been since a massive government-ordered security operation blocked their entry into the city at the beginning of their "Delhi *Chalo*" (Let's go to Delhi) protest in late November.

The Modi government has laid the groundwork for a violent crackdown aimed at breaking up the farmers' protest. Seizing on clashes between protesting farmers and police during a tractor rally in Delhi on Republic Day, January 26, the government ordered Delhi police to erect war zone-style barricades around the farmers' encampments, virtually imprisoning the protesters. The Delhi police are under the direct authority of Amit Shah, the Home Minister and Modi's chief henchman.

The three laws open India's agricultural sector to domination by giant multinational and domestic agribusiness concerns. Farmers worry that the legislation will enable international investors and powerful corporate interests to seize control of their land and dictate production and prices. In addition to the laws' repeal, the farmers are demanding legal guarantees that the minimum support pricing (MSP) system will not be dismantled. The MSP gives farmers a guaranteed minimum price for certain staple crops.

Modi and Shah are anxious to bring a quick end to the farmers' agitation, which has served as a rallying point for mass opposition to the government and done much to shatter its corporate media-concocted myth of invincibility. But for the moment they have opted to try to wear the farmers down rather than order a violent security crackdown that could have explosive consequences.

One consideration is the impact a clash between security forces and farmers would have on the state assembly elections being held in five states, including West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, next month. However, the government's biggest fear is that a state security crackdown on the protesting farmers would serve to galvanise mass social anger within the working class

and escape the control of the bourgeois opposition parties and trade unions.

This fear has been fuelled by a recent upsurge of protests and strikes by workers against the Modi government's pro-investor reforms, of which the farm laws are a part. About 1 million bank employees throughout India began a two-day strike yesterday against the Modi government's plans to privatise public sector banks. On two occasions during 2020, on January 8 and November 26, tens of millions of workers participated in one-day general strikes against the BJP government's pro-investor reforms and austerity measures. The second national strike also demanded emergency assistance for the hundreds of millions whom the government left to fend for themselves during its ill-prepared COVID-19 lockdown.

Recent months have also seen a series of strikes and protests involving workers in the public and private sectors, including coal miners, health care staff, and Toyota car assembly and auto parts workers.

But the working class has been prevented from intervening independently in the current political situation and providing leadership to the struggles of poor farmers and agricultural labourers by the treacherous policies of the Indian Stalinists and their affiliated unions. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) are endeavouring to keep the working class on the sidelines, while urging the farmers to place their hopes in the Congress Party, till recently the Indian ruling class's preferred party of government, and other right-wing parties.

Over the past two months, the BJP government has repeatedly said it is open to further talks with farm union representatives, but only if they drop their demand that the three pro-agribusiness laws adopted last September be repealed. That is, only if they agree to no more than minor amendments to the laws, which Modi and his minions continue to promote as a great boon to India's farmers.

The last round of talks between the farmer unions and the government took place on January 20. The only concession the government has made to date is to agree that the implementation of the laws will be delayed by 18 months. However, this is far less than meets the eye. The Supreme Court, which has greenlighted numerous anti-democratic and

authoritarian acts by the BJP government, had already ordered the laws' application suspended, because it feared the swelling protest movement was becoming a threat to the stability of Indian capitalism.

To discredit the agitating farmers and their supporters, Amit Shah and other leading BJP figures, supported by pro-government media outlets, have hurled communalist slurs against the protesting farmers. They have accused them of acting under the influence of "Khalistanis" or Sikh separatists, "anti-nationalists," and "Leftist and Maoist" forces.

The authorities have combined this stoking of communal animosities and political reaction with coercive measures designed to compel the farmers to end their protests. These have included the cutting of electricity, running water and, at times, even phone and Internet services to the camps, and the disruption of food, water supplies and the use of toilets. As of March 6, at least 248 farmers had died at the Delhi border from heart attacks and serious health conditions related to cold weather and other difficulties. Others have lost their lives to suicide or in road accidents.

The government has filed multiple legal cases against farmers and farm union leaders, and keeps harassing and arresting activists who have extended support to the farm protests. One example of this was the February 13 arrest by Delhi police of the young climate change activist Disha Ravi. She was threatened with sedition charges for allegedly helping create an online toolkit to support the farm protest movement.

While the government has had to temporarily put off application of its new pro-agribusiness laws, the Modi government is pushing ahead with several other crucial pro-investor "reform" measures. These include a privatisation drive and changes to labour laws that will expand the use of contract labour, allow employers to hire workers at will and make most worker job actions illegal. The Modi government is also working to further develop India's military-strategic partnership with the US, assisting Washington in its drive to strategically isolate, encircle and prepare for war with China.

The farmers' persistence in continuing their struggle for months despite their ruthless treatment by the government underscores their determination to overturn the agribusiness laws. But the farmers' unions, which are led by better-off farmers with connections to the political establishment, and the Stalinist parties have led the protest into a political blind alley. They continue to claim that the Modi government can be pressured into changing course, while simultaneously working to channel social opposition, whether from the farmers or the working class, behind the big business Congress Party and various regional and caste-ist parties.

On March 3, the Samyuktha Kisan Morcha (SMK) or United Farmers' Front, the coalition of farmers unions that has been leading the protest, announced that its leaders would visit the states where elections will take place next month to call on voters to reject the BJP. While the farm unions have avoided

declaring support for any single party, their initiative will inevitably play into the hands of Congress and its regional allies.

Since the launch of the farmers' agitation, the Stalinist CPM and CPI have closely coordinated their response to it with the Congress Party. Now, with the approach of the state elections, they are becoming ever more explicit in their attempts to transform the farmers' agitation into an adjunct to their efforts to defeat the BJP in the state polls.

The CPM and CPI have for decades served as an integral part of the political establishment, propping up governments at the centre that have implemented neo-liberal reforms and pursued ever-closer ties with Washington and implementing what they themselves term as "pro-investor reforms" in the states where they have led the government.

Now under conditions where the ruling class has turned to the Hindu-supremacist BJP to dramatically intensify the assault on India's workers and toilers, they are striving might and main to contain and politically suppress the mounting social opposition by tying it to the opposition. This includes their providing a "left" cover for the Congress Party, which is on political life-support having been widely discredited by its leading role over decades in implementing deregulation, privatisation, and other pro-market policies and in forging the Indo-US "global strategic partnership."

In West Bengal, the most populous state that will be going to the polls next month, the CPM and CPI are sharing platforms with the Congress Party, and have announced that their alliance is not just a temporary arrangement for the coming state elections, but will be followed by joint campaigns over social and political issues in the months and years ahead.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in a recent statement, Indian workers must repudiate the ruinous pro-capitalist politics of the Stalinists, "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 programme to fight the Modi government and bourgeois rule."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact