

Wide support for farmers' all-India mobilization against Modi's pro-agribusiness laws

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Monday's farmer-union called *Bharat Bandh* (all-India shut down) demanding the repeal of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's pro-agribusiness laws won widespread popular support. In many states, the 10-hour 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. protest significantly disrupted socioeconomic life. This was especially true in Punjab and Haryana in the north, and several states in the south where opposition-led governments made a show of supporting the farmers.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM-United Farmers' Front), an umbrella body of 40 farmers' groups, called the protest to mark one year since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right BJP rammed their "farm reform" through parliament with next to no debate. Sept. 26 also marked exactly 10 months since the farmers' organizations launched an agitation that has seen tens of thousands of protesting farmers continuously encamped at three entry points into the Delhi National Capital Territory.

In many parts of the country Monday, farmers and their supporters blocked highways, including from Uttar Pradesh into Delhi, and squatted on rail lines. Elsewhere, there were rallies at rail stations and outside government buildings. According to the *Tribune*, there was an "enormous response in Punjab and Haryana where tens of thousands of farmers blocked major highways, including National Highway 1 linking Delhi. Shops and other commercial establishments were closed in most towns as traders extended their support to the agitating farmers." Also impacted were Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the north, West Bengal and Odisha in the east, Tripura in the northeast, Rajasthan in the west, and Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the south.

The SKM called the support for Monday's *bandh* "unprecedented and historic," adding that the country's *annadaata* (food providers) had mounted protests in 23 of India's 28 states, with "spontaneous participation from various sections of the society ... witnessed at most places."

Spokespeople for the BJP government were quick to disparage the protests, labelling them an opposition party ploy. The government had hoped to wear down the protesting farmers and split their leaders—who are either drawn from more wealthy, politically-connected farmers or are themselves local

political leaders—through long drawn-out negotiations and the offer of minor, mainly cosmetic changes to the three laws. But the agitation for the repeal of the laws has persisted, even as the government insists that it is ready to countenance no more than a handful of amendments.

Most opposition parties—including the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, the Aam Aadmi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Samajwadi Party, Telugu Desam Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, and the Stalinist CPI and CPM—issued statements declaring support for the *bandh*. In some cases their party workers joined the farmers' protests. In Kerala, the Stalinist-led Left Democratic Front government joined with the trade unions in promoting the *bandh*, giving most government workers the day off and ordering virtually all state-owned buses off the road, resulting in a near total shutdown of the state. The Andhra Pradesh state government, led by a regional split-off from the Congress, the YSR Congress Party, also cancelled bus service for the duration of the protest. In Tamil Nadu, by contrast, the Stalinist-backed DMK government limited its "support" for the farmers to ordering party workers to wave DMK flags at a handful of demonstrations.

By associating themselves with the widely popular 10-month-long farmers' agitation against the BJP government's pro-agribusiness laws, the opposition parties hope to reap electoral gains in next year's state elections, especially in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh. Their principal concern, however, is that the burgeoning and increasingly explosive mass opposition to Modi and the Hindu supremacist BJP be contained within parliamentary and protest politics and thereby defused and suppressed.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged India, Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP had been pushed onto the back-foot by the mass protests against its discriminatory, anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act and a growing working class challenge to its "pro investor" agenda of austerity, privatization and the gutting of environmental and labour standards.

The Indian ruling class' ruinous and criminal response to the

pandemic, which has systematically prioritized corporate profits and investor wealth over saving lives, has resulted in mass death and enormously exacerbated an already acute social crisis. Led by Modi and his BJP, India's governments have pushed relentlessly to "reopen the economy," resulting in two devastating waves of the pandemic that have overwhelmed the country's ramshackle health care system, and now threaten to produce a third. Officially, India has recorded just under 450,000 COVID-19 deaths, but the true figure, as a spate of studies of increased mortality during the pandemic have demonstrated, is approaching 5 million or more.

Moreover, alongside the health crisis there has been a pandemic of joblessness and hunger as India's governments, beginning with the calamitous ill-prepared lockdown Modi imposed with less than four hours' notice in March 2020, have left India's workers and toilers to effectively fend for themselves amid unprecedented job losses. In August, according to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, there were 28 million workers employed in manufacturing as compared to 40 million before the pandemic struck. Desperate for any income and means of support, tens of millions Indians have turned to hawking or agriculture, whether as subsistence farmers or agricultural labourers, during the pandemic.

The Modi government and Indian bourgeoisie have responded to the pandemic's intensification of the crisis of global capitalism by shifting sharply further right. To attract investment, they are intensifying their class war assault on India's workers and toilers, and for both geostrategic and economic reasons they are integrating India ever more fully into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

In the September 2020 Monsoon session of parliament, the Modi government pushed through its three farm "reform" laws, which pave the way for agri-business to entirely dominate India's agriculture sector. They remove most restraints on hoarding, allow corporate houses to bypass the existing government markets (*mandis*), which farmers rightly fear will lead to the abolition of the government minimum support price for key commodities, and strengthen big business in its dealings with contract farmers, including by giving them near blanket legal immunity.

In the same parliamentary session, the Modi government pushed through a so-called labour law reform. It further expands employers' already sweeping prerogatives to employ contract workers and ensnares workers in an elaborate state-supervised "labour relations" regime with the aim of making most worker job actions illegal.

In this year's just-completed Monsoon session of parliament, the Modi government pushed through a further raft of right-wing laws, including legislation authorizing further privatizations and illegalizing all strikes by workers in defence-related industries. The government has also brought forward a "national monetization pipeline" scheme under which the

management and profits from a vast array of government and PSU (public sector unit) assets, from train lines and highways to power stations, will be "leased" to big business.

There is mass opposition within the working class to the Modi government's and the employers' attacks on jobs and wages and their criminal mishandling of the pandemic. Recent months have seen broad sections of workers, from bank clerks to coal miners, join one-day strikes against the government's privatization drive. Last Friday, hundreds of thousands of rural health (AHSA) workers, who have been on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic, staged a one-day strike to demand improved pay, insurance and proper personal protective equipment. Workers in India's globally-connected auto sector have been involved in a wave of struggles against speed-up, poverty wages and precarious contract jobs. In late May, a worker rebellion against the lack of COVID-19 safety measures forced Hyundai, Ford and Renault-Nissan to temporarily shut down their plants in the auto manufacturing belt near Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

However, the unions and the ostensibly left parties, above all the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and its close ally the Communist Party of India (CPI), are doing everything in their power to straitjacket the working class resistance and politically suppress it.

While mouthing support for the farmers they have kept the working class on the side-lines, and above all, worked to prevent it from intervening as an independent political force, fighting to rally the farmers, and especially the small and marginal farmers and agricultural workers, behind it in the fight for a workers government and a socialist-internationalist program. Long an integral part of the capitalist political establishment, the Stalinists aim to smother the popular opposition to Modi by subordinating it to the efforts to bring to power an alternate right-wing government, whether led by the Congress or a combination of regional-chauvinist and caste-ist parties, in India's 2024 national election.



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