After year of protests, Modi says three pro-agribusiness laws will be repealed

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced last Friday that his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government will repeal the three pro-agribusiness laws it rammed through parliament in September 2020.

Modi's announcement came exactly one week before farmers and their supporters were to hold events across India to mark one year since the November 26, 2020 launch of an ongoing mass agitation against Modi's farm laws. The agitation, which at its height last winter saw hundreds of thousands of farmers camped on the outskirts of the national capital Delhi, has galvanized opposition to the government and repeatedly pushed it onto the back foot.

Hitherto, Modi had vowed his government would never repeal the three laws, which implement measures long demanded by big business. They throw open the door wide to agribusiness by sanctioning the hoarding of produce, diminishing the role of state-owned markets (mandis) and granting corporate firms broad legal immunity in their contract-farming operations.

In a nationally televised address Friday, India's prime minister and would-be autocrat said he was "apologizing" to the "nation" for the failure of the BJP's farm law "reform." Maintaining the government's fraudulent pretense that those opposed to the pro-agribusiness laws constitute only a minority of farmers, centered in north India, Modi said, "We regret we could not convince all farmers. Only a section of them was opposing the laws, but we kept trying to educate and inform them."

In fact, the BJP government slandered the protesting farmers, claiming they were being manipulated by Khalistanis (supporters of a separate Sikh state), Maoists and the "anti-national" opposition parties, and repeatedly deployed state violence against them. In an attempt to suppress the protest movement before it began, the BJP central and Haryana and Uttar Pradesh state governments mobilized tens of thousands of security forces, imposed draconian restrictions on public gatherings, and arrested hundreds last November 26 and 27. Only last month, the son of one of Modi's ministers was charged with murder for his role in an attack on protesting farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh, that resulted in nine fatalities.

Protesting farmers have welcomed Modi's repeal announcement but say they will continue their agitation until the three laws are officially rescinded. The Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM—United Farmers' Front), an umbrella group of farmers organizations opposed to the BJP's pro-agribusiness laws, said it will proceed as planned with protest events this Friday and a march on parliament on November 29, timed to coincide with the beginning of its "winter session."

The SKM is also demanding the government enshrine in law the "guarantee" it gave during talks last winter to never abolish the Minimum Support Price and that the frame-up criminal charges the police laid against farmer leaders, at the government's instigation, be dropped.

The repeal announcement represents a significant retreat on the part of the BJP government, which has touted the farm laws as proof of its commitment to the acceleration and intensification of "pro-investor" reforms.

However, this retreat is transparently of a tactical character, so as to better prepare and press forward with an offensive aimed at intensifying the exploitation of India's workers and toilers and realizing the Indian bourgeoisie's great-power ambitions by integrating New Delhi ever more fully into US imperialism's military-strategic offensive against China.

As it is, the government is in the midst of pushing through a vast array of regressive changes. These include: the implementation of a labour law "reform" that would illegalize most worker job action and further expand precarious contract-labour jobs; a fire sale of dozens of state-owned enterprises; and the rolling out of a "national monetization scheme" under which private companies will be given control of much of the country's port, railroad, highway and power generation infrastructure in exchange for paying the central government an annual fee or dividend.

The government's sudden about-face on the farm laws attests to the extent to which it has been gravely weakened by its criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. After a short, ill-prepared lockdown in March-April 2020 in which hundreds of millions who lost all income overnight were effectively left to fend for themselves, the Modi government has systematically sabotaged all anti-COVID-19 measures to ensure corporate profits flow.

Last April, as India was engulfed by a tsunami of mass infections and deaths and the country's ramshackle health care system collapsed, Modi vowed to "save" India from "lockdown," not the deadly virus. Adding gross insult to mortal injury, authorities brazenly lie about the death toll, claiming 466,000 people have died from COVID-19, when a spate of scientific studies have shown that the pandemic has killed at least 3 million and more likely 5 million Indians.

The greatest fear of the government and the Indian ruling class is

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that mass anger over their "profits before lives" pandemic policy will intersect with the growing social opposition to capitalist austerity, rampant social inequality and further pro-investor "reform."

Even before the pandemic began, the BJP government had been shaken by the mass protests that erupted across India, uniting working people across caste and communal lines, against its anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act. Recent months have seen a wave of working-class struggles against employer attacks on jobs and wages and unsafe conditions amid the pandemic. For more than three weeks, some 95,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers have been on strike in defiance of threats of savage reprisals for engaging in "illegal" job actions. In May, autoworkers at Hyundai, Ford and Renault-Nissan plants in Tamil Nadu rebelled against the lack of coronavirus safety measures, forcing the plants' temporary closure. Millions of public sector workers, employed in numerous industries from banking and insurance to steel and coal mines, are protesting against the government's privatization drive.

The BJP had hoped that the farmers' agitation would peter out if it dragged out negotiations and held firm in insisting that it would agree to no more than limited, largely cosmetic amendments to its farm "reform" laws. But buoyed by widespread support from working people who warmly welcomed their defiant stand against Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP and sympathized with their struggle against big business, the farmers persevered despite numerous hardships and police and BJP provocations. At least 750 farmers, most of them small and marginal farmers, died during the protests due to exposure to extreme temperatures, heart attacks, COVID-19, accidents and police and goon violence.

The government did repeatedly make political preparations and deploy security forces in readiness for a violent state attack on the protesting farmers. But ultimately Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, concluded that this was too dangerous. Wholesale repression and the fatalities it would have inevitably entailed risked sparking mass opposition across India and, above all, the direct intervention of the working class.

India's Supreme Court has given its legal imprimatur to numerous anti-democratic outrages committed by the BJP government and the Hindu right from the 2019 constitutional coup against Kashmir to the building of a Hindu temple on the site of the razed Babri Masjid mosque. But, reflecting the fears in ruling circles, the court repeatedly counseled the government to avert a direct clash with the farmers.

Undoubtedly, a factor in the government's decision to repeal the laws is the coming state assembly elections in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh, far and away the country's most populous state, and the Punjab, where an embattled Congress Party is seeking to hold onto one of the few remaining states where it holds, or has a share of, power. Along with Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab have been the states most impacted by the farmers' protests.

The reaction of the corporate media to the government's repeal announcement has been mixed, with those endorsing it doing so on the understanding that this is only a temporary retreat. The Chennai-based *Hindu* insisted the laws' impending withdrawal "does not invalidate the urgent case for reforms in the agriculture sector. … Those will have to be pursued in a manner suitable to a federal democratic polity as India's."

The *Times of India*, which has repeatedly warned if the BJP were to back down in the face of the farmers' agitation it would encourage broader opposition to the government's big business agenda, called Modi's repeal announcement "a terrible message for liberal reforms in a country that needs liberal reforms by bags-full." It urged the "farm reform process" be rapidly "renewed," adding that "India's future as a modern economic power" is at stake.

Predictably, the trade unions and Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its smaller, older ally, the Communist Party of India (CPI)—have been quick to seize on Modi's repeal announcement to try to legitimize their right-wing politics. That is their systematic suppression of the class struggle and subordination of the working class to the Congress Party, the traditional preferred party of the government of the Indian bourgeoisie, and a host of right-wing caste-ist and ethno-regionalist parties. CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury called the repeal of the farm laws by the Modi government a "historic win for farmers" and called on Modi to "apologise for the hardship and trouble" he had caused them.

The reality is that the Stalinists, while mouthing support for the farmers, did everything to keep the working class on the sidelines. Above all, they prevented it from intervening in the crisis sparked by the farmers' agitation as an independent force, mobilizing the rural masses, especially the small and marginal farmers and agricultural workers, behind it in the fight against Modi and the entire capitalist establishment and for a workers' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.

Thus while the BJP's farm "reform" stalled, the Modi government has been able to press forward with myriad anti-working class measures, while relentlessly stoking communalism.

The great danger is that by diverting the working class into protest and parliamentary politics and harnessing it to the Congress-led campaign to replace Modi in 2024 with an alternate right-wing capitalist regime, the trade unions and Stalinist parties are providing time for the Hindu supremacist BJP—and, most importantly, its Indian bourgeois masters—to regroup and retake the offensive.

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