Wave of protests against India’s new military recruitment scheme driven by anger over mass unemployment

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Mass protests erupted across India in response to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government’s June 14 announcement of a new four-year, “merit-based” military recruitment scheme—Agnipath or Tour of Duty—aimed at slashing the military’s expenditure on personnel.

To the dismay of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, the protests, which were organized by young people via social media, persisted for days. They are an expression of mounting social anger over mass joblessness, especially in north India, the BJP’s traditional political stronghold.

Under the new recruitment scheme, all non-officer recruits or *jawans* will henceforth be denied pension and other social security benefits.

Indian military and geopolitical experts have long called for action to curtail the salary and pension costs of India's 1.38 million-strong armed forces, so that more of the mammoth military budget can be devoted to buying advanced weapons systems.

The 2022-23 Union Budget allocated 5.25 trillion rupees to defence. Of this, the pension bill represented more than 20 percent, 1.19 trillion rupees.

For the past two decades, India’s governments, whether led by the BJP or the Congress Party, have rapidly built up India’s armed forces, including pressing forward with the building of a “blue water navy” and developing a nuclear triad—that is the capacity to carry out nuclear strikes from land, air and underwater.

Developing India’s military prowess through the acquisition of new weapons systems and the “indigenisation” of armaments production is seen as crucial to aggressively pursuing India’s great-power ambitions, countering its principal rivals—China and to a lesser extent Pakistan—and deepening its reactionary “global strategic partnership” with Washington.

These considerations were summed up in remarks by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on June 13, the day before he announced the Agnipath recruitment scheme. Singh told a class of Indian Administrative Service personnel who had just completed a joint civilian-military training program, that India must be ready to wage “full-scale war.” He cited the US-NATO war with Russia in Ukraine to argue that India is facing a more turbulent geopolitical environment, marked by cyber- and proxy wars, and referred, albeit obliquely, to the need for India to prepare for war with nuclear-armed China. “Considering the machinations of our neighbours, especially one, as you know, India needs to keep itself ready for a full-scale war in the future,” declared India’s Defence Minister.

India is already the third-largest military spender in the world, trailing only the US and China. According to data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in April, India's military spending amounted to US $76.6 billion in 2021, an increase of 0.9 percent from 2020 and 33 percent from 2012. Indicating India's preparation for military confrontation with China and Pakistan, SIPRI noted: “India has prioritized the modernization of its armed forces and self-reliance in arms production.”

Under the Agnipath scheme all *jawans* recruited to the military’s three wings–Navy, Army and Air Force—will receive four-year contracts. This includes a six-month training period. At the end of the four years, only 25 percent will be re-enlisted for regular military service.

The first allotment of Agnipath recruits, Agniveers, are to be enlisted over the next 18 months, with 46,000 youth inducted. Initially the government limited Agnipath recruitment to those aged between 17.5 and 21. But in an attempt to placate the protesters—some of whom had enrolled in private “military training courses” during a COVID-19 pandemic freeze on recruitment to better their chances of being selected—the government has now raised the age limit to 23.

Of the 46,000 only 11,500 will be retained at the expiry of their four-year contracts. The remaining 34,500 recruits will be discharged with a contributory severance package of 1.17 million rupees ($14,955) each. There are also provisions for non-contributory death and disability compensation. During the 4-year period, the salary package of an Agniveer will be around 476,000 rupees ($6,083) in the first years, rising to 692,000 rupees ($8,845) in the fourth year.

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Unlike under the existing military recruitment framework, however, these short-term soldiers will not be eligible for pension or gratuity. And when their four years as potential cannon fodder for the Indian ruling class comes to an end, they will be pushed into India's massive army of unemployed, under-employed and precariously employed.

The vast majority of Indian workers are employed in the so-call "informal sector," with no social security, and pension or health benefits. Even in the so-called formal sector (large private firms, the state sector and government-owned firms) contract-labour has become increasingly pervasive.

Under these conditions, the BJP government's decision to greatly restrict the possibility of finding permanent employment in the military, with access to pensions and other benefits, led to an explosion of frustration among a section of youth, especially in rural villages and smaller towns and cities.

Rohit Kumar, a farmer's son from Anandpur village in Bihar's Begusarai district, who has been waiting for four years to join the Army, told The Wire: "According to the new scheme I will work in the army for four years and get a salary of Rs. 25,000-30,000 a month. After four years, I may be thrown out of the army. What will I do then? After four years, I will have to sell *pakodas* (street food)! It would be better if I take a private job somewhere else."

Eighteen-year-old Shailesh Kumar Rai from Makhdumgani in Bihar's Chhapara district had also set his sights on a military career. "I have been preparing for two years," he said, "with the hope that I will have a stable career after joining the Army and not that I will become unemployed after just four years."

Because of the Modi government's ruinous mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of Indians, particularly migrant workers from rural areas who had gone to major cities in search of employment, lost their livelihoods overnight. India's unemployment rate in last December stood at 7.91 percent, compared with 6.3 percent in 2018-19 and 4.7 percent in 2017-18.

India's youth make up more than one-fifth of the country's 1.4 billion people. Every year, the labour force grows by more than 5 million people. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), nearly 30 million Indians aged 20-29 were jobless and looking for work in 2021. Statistics from the International Labour Organisation showed that in February this year, one in every four youths aged between 15 and 24 was out of work. Meanwhile, according to CMIE's April 2022 data, 42 percent of the 20-24 age group and 12.7 percent of the 25-29 age group are jobless.

The outrage over the recruitment scheme triggered angry protests by tens of thousands of military job aspirants in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Telangana. These states, which have some of India's highest unemployment and poverty rates, contribute a substantial portion of the Indian armed forces' manpower. The protesters demanded the government withdraw the Agnipath scheme and retain the old recruitment process. They blockaded major highway and railway lines, leading to violent clashes with police and security forces. In some places, buses were set alight.

At least one person died in southern Telangana when police opened fire after a crowd gathered at Secunderabad railway station and torched train coaches. Scores of people, including police officers, were injured.

As the protests grew, a number of states invoked Section 144 of India's Criminal Code, banning gatherings of more than four people. Police arrested hundreds of protesters, including over 700 in Bihar alone.

The government, backed by big business and the corporate media, has remained firmly committed to the new recruitment scheme and declared that it will not be rolled back. Addressing a joint press briefing with officers from the Indian Navy and Air Force, Lt. General Anil Puri from the Ministry of Defence's Department of Military Affairs announced that those wanting to join the military will have to present a certificate, subject to police verification, showing "they were not part of anti-Agnipath protests or vandalism.

Various opposition parties, including the Congress Party and Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, have rushed to declare their support for the protests against the Agnipath recruitment scheme. However, their opposition to the Modi government's policy is from the right, from the standpoint that it will weaken the armed forces. Moreover, they have nothing to propose in regards to the real issue—the calamitous economic crisis and the determination of the ruling class to place its full burden on the working class and rural toilers.

Former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, a Congress leader, criticized the scheme at a press conference for making a "mockery of [military] training" and because it "inducts into the defence forces an ill-trained and ill-motivated soldier." In other words, his concern with the new scheme is that it will undermine India's military, which would cut across Congress' demand for a more bellicose stand against China.

The CPM, which has been promoting the Congress Party for decades as a "secular" alternative to the BJP, is even more explicit. In a June 16 statement, the Stalinist party said that it "strongly disapprove(s)" of the scheme because it "does disservice to India's national interests"—that is the reactionary interests of the Indian bourgeoisie—and "severely compromises the quality and efficiency of our professional armed forces." In a revealing line, the CPM statement declares: "It is criminal to call upon our youth to be prepared to make the supreme sacrifice without the minimum protection of job security."

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