

Indian farmer protest continues in face of Modi government's massive deployment of security forces

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Tens of thousands of Indian peasant farmers are continuing their *Dilli Challo* (Let's go to Delhi) protest in the face of a massive state security crackdown directed by the country's far-right, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

To prevent the farmers from taking their protest to India's national capital, police and paramilitaries have blockaded major roads between Haryana and Punjab, the state where the farmers' agitation is centered, since Tuesday. Two border crossings between Haryana and the Delhi National Capital Territory have also been shut down.

At least a hundred farmers have been injured in clashes with security forces, who have used *lathi* (baton) charges, rubber bullets, water cannon and copious amounts of tear gas, some of it dropped by drones, to beat back the protesters.

On Thursday, Haryana's BJP state government ordered that a shutdown of all cell phone and mobile internet services in seven of the state's 22 districts be extended through Saturday.

Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP central government has not only categorically rejected the farmers' key demands. It is determined to use the full might of the state to prevent them from getting anywhere near the capital.

Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, fear that anything like a reprise of the 2020-2021 farmers' agitation—during which tens of thousands of farmers and their families encamped on the outskirts of Delhi for over a year—could disrupt the BJP's campaign to win a third successive five-year term in government in the national elections slated for this spring.

The previous *Dilli Challo* ended with the Modi government forced to make a tactical retreat and repeal three recently adopted pro-agribusiness "reform" bills. It did so only after a year during which it attempted to starve the protesters out, and probed whether they could be goaded into a violent confrontation without igniting mass protests among workers and rural toilers across India.

As part of the deal to end the 2020-21 protest, the government agreed to establish a committee to look into the farmers' demand for a government-guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) for basic crops. That committee has met some three dozen times. However, the MSP is no closer to implementation, as the government dismisses it as "unaffordable."

Farm incomes, meanwhile, continue to be squeezed by rising input costs (including for fuel and fertilizer), the parcellation of

agricultural plots among succeeding generations and the vicissitudes of global agricultural markets and capitalist-driven climate change.

As of Thursday evening, tens of thousands of farmers and farm labourers were encamped on the Punjab-side of the Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border crossing, which lies some 200 kilometres (125 miles) from Delhi. Directly in front of them was a veritable war-zone: thousands of heavily-armed security forces and a multi-layered blockade, consisting of large granite blocks, heavy machinery and transport containers, and large stretches of coils of concertina barbed wire. Large spikes or nails were also strewn on the highway to puncture the tires of any tractor that might attempt to break through.

The farmers have been instructed by farm union leaders to stay put pending the outcome of talks with the government. According to news reports, when those talks broke up in the early hours of Friday morning, both government and farm union representatives claimed significant progress, although their remarks suggested this was more on the possibility of the government granting a farm debt waiver than it adopting the MSP. Union Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda called the talks "very positive" and said the two sides had agreed to meet again on Sunday. Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (Working-Farmer Front) Coordinator Sarvan Singh Pandher said, "If the commitments made during the meeting are translated into action, it would be highly beneficial for the farmer."

Underscoring that the heads of the farmer unions, who tend to be drawn from the more prosperous and politically connected farmers, are angling for a deal with the Modi government, they are stressing the supposed "non-political character" of their agitation.

Indian big business, for its part, stands full-square behind the Modi government in its opposition to the farmers' MSP demand. It views the demand as cutting across its push to increase profit extraction from the agricultural sector, by developing large agribusinesses at the expense of small farmers; and it fears any further retreat by the government in the face of farmer protests could serve to galvanize opposition within the working class.

In a February 13 editorial, the *Times of India* bluntly declared that the "legal guarantee of MSP is a bad idea and should be buried for good." It recommended instead that any meeting of government and farm union leaders "should focus on solving issues such as withdrawal of police cases from earlier protests and

release of seized tractors,” things that the government had previously “promised to do.”

In the run-up to Thursday’s talks, BJP ministers and supporters continued to smear the protests, by suggesting they were a tool of the opposition parties and had been infiltrated by elements intent on violence.

Defending its suspension of mobile and internet services and blockading of the border with Punjab, the BJP Haryana state government told the Punjab and Haryana High Court that the farmers’ unions are “hell bent” on fomenting chaos in north India and that the farmers’ agitation is instilling a “sense of fear” among the people of the state.

“This protest seems political,” said Pramod Chaudhary, a member of the government’s MSP committee and leader of the BJP-aligned Bharatiya Kisan Sangh. “There are,” he continued, “concerns about the spread of violence, just like we witnessed last time at the Red Fort.” This latter point was an inflammatory reference to a BJP government-instigated clash with farmers in Delhi in January 2021 that it subsequently exploited to spread the lie that the agitation was being manipulated, if not led, by pro-Khalistanis (that is advocates of a separate Sikh state.)

Since the 1960s, India’s central government has set “minimum” support prices during each growing season for more than 20 crops. However, the MSP, which in any event applies only to government purchases, is for most crops only nominal. Dr. Ranjith Ghuman, a noted economist and professor at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar told *The Hindu* that “the past track record shows only three to four crops, mainly wheat, paddy and cotton, and at times pulses, were being procured at MSP while the remaining crops were being procured at much below the MSP.”

The farmers are demanding that the recommendation made by the government-appointed 2004-2006 National Commission on Farmers for a true minimum price guarantee be implemented. Headed by Mankombu Sambasivan Swaminathan, a renowned agriculturist who is considered to be a leader of India’s “Green Revolution,” the commission said the MSP should be at least 50 percent more than the weighted average cost of production. It further stipulated that the “cost of production” should include the cost of all inputs and the “cost” of renting the land, even if tiller-owned, leading it to be dubbed the C2+50 percent formula.

The Swaminathan Commission was established by the Congress Party-led, Stalinist-backed United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government shortly after the shock defeat of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in the May 2004 election. But the UPA, which pressed forward with privatization, deregulation and other “pro-investor” reforms, made short shrift of the MSP proposal. UPA Agriculture Minister and senior Congress Party leader K.V. Thomas said it could, “distort the market,” adding, “a mechanical linkage between MSP and cost of production may be counter-productive in some cases.”

Suddenly, in the midst of this week’s farmers’ agitation, the Congress Party—in a transparent attempt to boost their sagging electoral fortunes—has declared that if they form India’s next government they will implement legislation guaranteeing an MSP based on the Swaminathan Commission formula for all farmers.

This is patently a fraud. The Congress Party today heads a right-

wing electoral bloc, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance or INDIA, that is no less committed to continued “pro-investor reform” and the anti-China Indo-US military-strategic partnership than Modi and his BJP. Congress and its allies also connive with the Hindu right, as exemplified by the prominent participation in their bloc of the pro-Hindutva and fascistic Shiv Sena. None of this prevents the three Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Maoist CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation—from working might and main to channel the working class and rural toilers behind the INDIA bloc and its efforts to provide the bourgeoisie with an alternate right-wing government.

In January the CPM-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) announced that it was joining with the farm unions to hold a Grameen Bandh, or rural shutdown, this Friday, February 16. The bandh is supposed to popularize a series of demands that in some way address the immense social crisis confronting rural masses. These include enactment of the MSP and an expansion of the MGNREGA program that is supposed to guarantee 100 days of minimum-wage menial labour to one member of every rural family per year, but has been massively cut back by the Modi government as part of its austerity drive.

As they did during the 2020-21 farmers’ movement, the Stalinists are seeking to limit workers to “supporting” the farmers, while they stump for votes for the INDIA alliance. While they wave red flags and hold up portraits of Lenin and Marx, the Stalinists function as an integral part of the Indian bourgeois political establishment to suppress the class struggle. As such, they are bitterly opposed to mobilizing the working class, whose ranks have massively expanded over the past three decades, as an independent political force, rallying the peasant farmers and the even more brutally exploited agricultural labourers behind it in an offensive against the Modi government and capitalism in India.



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