

Indian security forces shoot one farmer dead as protest nears three-week mark

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As the protest by hundreds of thousands of farmers in India approaches the end of its third week, at least one farmer has been killed and nearly 200 injured amid a wave of brutal state repression. The crackdown has been spearheaded by the Hindu-Supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with the active support of several state governments in northern India.

On February 13, thousands of farmers predominantly from the northern state of Punjab began their “Dilli Chalo” (Let’s go to Delhi) march. Their demands include a legal Minimum Support Price (MSP) for their crops and farm loan waivers. The protest action was initiated by two peasant-farmers’ unions, the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM, Working-Farmer Front) and the Samyukta Kisan Morcha or United Peasants’ Front (Non-Political).

As a devoted political representative of Indian and foreign capital, the Modi government responded by launching brutal repression, forcing the farmers to encamp on the Punjab side of the Punjab-Haryana state border crossing at Shambhu, which lies some 200 kilometers (125 miles) from Delhi. The BJP government has declared war on the farmers by mobilizing tens of thousands of police and paramilitary forces; erecting multilayer barricades with massive concrete blocks and barbed wire; disrupting internet and mobile services and issuing executive orders requiring X/Twitter to censor specific accounts and posts related to the farmers’ protest; and attacking them with tear gas canisters from drones.

The Modi government’s nervous response to the farmers’ agitation is born of fear it could become a rallying point for far broader social opposition to the government’s pro-investor policies and anti-China alliance with Washington. This fear is all the more acute as Modi and his BJP attempt to secure a third successive term as India’s national government in general (Lok Sabha) elections scheduled for April and May. In office since May 2014, Modi has failed to fulfill any of his false electoral promises to India’s toiling masses, including “to double” farmers’ income by 2022. While India’s economy has expanded, the mass of the population remains mired in poverty and extreme economic insecurity, as virtually all the growth in income and wealth has gone to the tiny capitalist elite and their upper middle-class hangers-on.

The farmers’ unions were scheduled to announce on February 29 their plans for the continuation of their march on Delhi. However, in a brief statement issued that day, the unions declared

that they were “mourning” the death of Shubhkaran Singh, a young farmer shot by the security forces, and would not announce their future plans until March 3 at the earliest. Shubhkaran’s cremation took place in his native village of Balloh the same day, over a week after his death. Earlier, the unions had insisted that the cremation should not proceed until the authorities filed a case against those responsible for the farmer’s death.

More than respect for Shubhkaran lies behind the unions repeated delays in announcing next steps. Under conditions where the government has rejected farmers’ key demands and indicated its readiness to use massive state violence to prevent the march from proceeding toward Delhi, they are uncertain and divided as to what to do next.

Shubhkaran suffered a fatal head injury caused by a rubber bullet on the evening of February 21. Speaking to *The Wire*, his uncle Buta Singh blamed the Haryana state government for creating chaos by halting farmers from marching to Delhi, saying, “Shubh would have been alive if farmers were allowed to march peacefully.” According to Buta, Shubhkaran’s family is heavily indebted and possess less than 2.5 acres of farmland. “Shubh was our only hope to take care of his aged parents and two sisters,” added Buta.

On Tuesday, February 27, the SKM held “Quit WTO Day” protests demanding that India’s agriculture sector not be subject to World Trade Organization rules. According to the SKM, this protest in which farmers parked their tractors along state and national highways without obstructing vehicular traffic was held in more than 400 districts around India. “Farmers have realized the threats to the agriculture sector due to the agreements of India with WTO,” Darshan Pal, an SKM leader, told the *Indian Express*.

The Punjab state government, run by the Aam Aadmi or Common Man’s Party (AAP), is collaborating with the BJP-led Haryana government in the latter’s brutal repression against the farmers. It has refused to file a FIR (First Information Report) against the security personnel from Haryana whom the protesters hold responsible for Shubhkaran’s death. This exposes the pro-investor character of the AAP government, which has sought to posture as sympathetic to the farmers.

To mollify the mass anger over the young farmer’s killing, the AAP state government announced a 10 million Indian rupee (US \$120,000) ex-gratia payment and jobs for Shubhkaran’s next of kin. However, farm union leaders initially rejected the ex-gratia payment, citing the state government’s refusal to file a case

against the security personnel involved.

At least nine other farmers have been severely injured, some suffering multiple fractures, during the police repression. Since the protest began, the number of injured has risen to around 180. Patiala District civil surgeon Raminder Kaur told *The Wire* that most of the injuries were due to the dropping of tear gas shells or the firing of rubber bullets. Apart from this, three further casualties have been reported. Two farmers died from cardiac arrest at the protest site, and one fatality was caused by a suspected bullet injury, she said.

Giving a glimpse of the brutality of the ongoing repression against the farmers, Haryana police picked up another farmer, 32-year-old Pritpal Singh from Sangrur, and brutally assaulted him. He was “stuffed in a sack.” He is currently at PGI Hospital in Rohtak in Haryana with a broken limb and other severe injuries. Speaking to the Newsland website, Pritpal’s wife Amandeep Kaur said: “His face was disfigured from the beating. His teeth are broken. Even after two days, his nose is bleeding. He has a severe head injury too.” By unleashing such ruthless police violence, Modi and the Indian ruling elite want to send a clear message not only to the farmers in other parts of India, but also to the entire working class: the BJP government will not tolerate any opposition to its pro-investor policies.

Following the Feb. 21 clash that resulted in Shubhkaran Singh’s death, the BJP-led Haryana state government threatened farm union leaders that it will invoke the National Security Act (NSA) 1980. Under the NSA, a state or Central government is empowered to detain a person for one year or more if there is reason to believe that he/she may be engaging in “an act threatening national security.” Amid heavy criticism and mounting anger from farmers against this warning, the government authorities were forced to back-track and withdraw their threat. It also released all 16 farmer leaders and activists whom it had taken into detention.

Speaking to the *Indian Express*, a senior Haryana government official admitted that the reason for the about-face on invoking the NSA was that it would have proven “counterproductive and invited outrage not only from the farmers but also other sections of society.”

The government has combined its brutal repression with offers of some meager concessions to induce the farmers to stop their protest.

During the fourth round of discussions between peasant-farmer leaders and government ministers on February 18, the BJP central government offered contract-based “assurances” that various government agencies would buy five crops—the pulses, arhar, tur and urad, and corn and cotton—at an MSP. Well aware that the protesting farmers would angrily turn down such “assurances,” which fall well short of their demands, the SKM “outrightly rejected” the proposal, which the government in any case soon backtracked on. Rather than guaranteeing a minimum crop price, the BJP Agriculture Minister said the five crops supposedly subject to it would be procured on a “contract basis.” The government’s “real intention” was thereby “exposed,” said KMM Coordinator Sarwan Singh Pandher.

Farmers have vowed that they will not accept anything less than the full implementation of the MSP recommendation of the

government-appointed Swaminathan commission. After several years of deliberations, the commission proposed in 2006 that the MSP should be at least 150 percent of the weighted average cost of production. It also said that the MSP should include the cost of all inputs and the “cost” of renting the land, even in the case of tiller-owned lands. Given the fact that the BJP government failed to fulfill many of its major promises made during the first Dilli Chalo in 2020-21, farmers are rightly suspicious of the “promises” being made by the BJP this time.

For decades, India’s governments whether led by the BJP, the Congress Party, or various caste- and ethno-regionalist parties have worked to commercialize the agriculture sector, while cutting support for small farmers including subsidies for fertilizer and other key inputs.

While farmer union leaders are saying they are intensifying their agitation by mobilizing other farmers and trade unions, these actions are based on the bankrupt perspective that the government can be pressured into changing course. In fact, the Modi government will not make any serious concessions to the farmers, because to do so would cut across its pro-investor policies and have the potential to galvanize broader social opposition, above all from the working class.

The opposition political parties including the Congress and the Stalinist Communist Party (Marxist) or CPM are posing as supporters of the farmers with the aim of using the protest to boost the fortunes of their Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) electoral bloc. Led by the dynastic Congress Party, till recently the Indian ruling class’s preferred party of national government, INDIA offers the bourgeoisie a right-wing alternative government to Modi’s BJP. One no less committed than it to “pro-investor” reform and the Indo-US military-security alliance.

As during the year-long 2020-21 farmers’ protest, the CPM, while feigning support for the farmers, is working to keep the working class on the sidelines. Above all, the Stalinists seek to prevent the working class from intervening as an independent force, fighting to rally the farmers and all the rural toilers, above all the agricultural labourers, in a mass movement against the Modi regime and the entire Indian ruling class and for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies. This was particularly shown during the Feb. 16 Grameen bandh (rural shutdown) called by the SKM and the joint platform of central trade unions, which is led by the CPM-affiliated Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). Underscoring the Stalinists’ perspective of subordinating the working class to the INDIA alliance, CITU President K. Hemantha, said the aim of the bandh was “to defeat the BJP government in the 2024 elections.”



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