The criminalization of the Noida worker protests: How India's authorities are seeking to stamp out worker opposition through state repression

Kranti Kumara
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From Manesar in Haryana to Uttar Pradesh's Noida township, tens of thousands of workers in the industrial suburbs that surround Delhi, India's capital and largest urban agglomeration, walked off the job in April. Their demands were elementary: a wage sufficient to feed a family, a halt to 12-14 hour workdays, basic dignity on the factory floor, and the enforcement of regulations on overtime pay that India's corporations routinely flout. The response of the Indian state, led by the ruling far-right BJP, to this entirely legitimate, supposedly constitutionally protected agitation was not negotiation. It was mass arrest, torture, preventive detention, and the invocation of a colonial-era derived law, the 1980 National Security Act (NSA), designed to lock people up without trial.

Almost two months on, hundreds of workers remain in jail on trumped-up charges of violence and disorderly conduct. The authorities have also arbitrarily detained left-wing social activists who supported the workers' protests and helped publicize them. At least half a dozen of them are being detained without charge under the NSA.

If the authorities have moved so aggressively to stamp out the protests and make an example of the workers, it was because the protest movement erupted entirely outside the official trade unions—including the Stalinist-aligned Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and All-India Trades Union Congress (CITU)—which for decades have suppressed the class struggle.

From the outset, the authorities moved swiftly to reframe the workers' rebellion as a "law and order" problem—a familiar tactic of every ruling class throughout history when confronted with militant worker protests. The narrative constructed by the Uttar Pradesh BJP government and the police, and dutifully amplified by the corporate media, was that sinister "outsiders" with connections to India's arch-enemy, Pakistan, and Naxhalite (Maoist) insurgents had instigated the protests and were using them to engineer violence. This framing served a transparent purpose: to criminalize the struggle itself, isolate the workers from public sympathy, and terrorize anyone who might consider standing in solidarity with them.

Provocateurs in uniform

The violence that erupted in Noida on April 13 did not spontaneously materialize from workers' actions. As the WSWS previously reported, police mounted a frontal assault on the assembled workers, beating them with batons and dragging detainees through the streets. Only after this assault did workers respond by throwing stones and setting some police vehicles on fire—a response that any honest observer would recognize as self-defense. The identities of those who set other vehicles alight remain, conveniently, unknown.

This script is not new in India's industrial zones. Workers and their defenders have long documented how corporate management deploys goons in workers' clothing to perform violent acts that then provide the pretext for brutal police crackdowns. The most egregious precedent was at the Maruti Suzuki assembly plant in Manesar—where, in July 2012, a mysterious fire erupted amid a management provoked factory-floor altercation. With the full support of Haryana's then-Congress Party state government, the police subsequently indicted on frame-up murder charges 13 workers, including all 12 members of the leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, a newly formed independent union that had led a militant struggle to improve the lot of contract workers. After five years of pre-trial imprisonment and a demonstrably rigged trial, they were sentenced to life imprisonment. The same template— provocation, frame-up charges, mass incarceration—is being applied today against a new generation of workers demanding their rights.

The protests in Noida were preceded, and to at least some extent, sparked by a militant worker agitation in the Gurugram-Manesar industrial belt. The Haryana BJP state government sought to quell this agitation through a combination of police repression and a belated, modest minimum wage increase.

In Manesar's Richa Global Exports factory at IMT Sector 7, a workers' strike over wages that had been running peacefully for several days turned violent on April 9, or so claimed management and the police.

Court documents filed at the Additional Sessions Court in Gurugram—shared with the WSWS by a defence lawyer—reveal the prosecution's case against one worker, Vijendra, a 20-year-old from Uttar Pradesh who earns his living in a garment factory. He is one of more than a dozen workers accused of being "riotous"—of destroying company machinery, setting company and police vehicles ablaze, and assaulting management personnel. The First Information Report (FIR) charges him under more than a dozen sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the draconian criminal code that India's Narendra Modi-led, national BJP government passed in 2023. He has been denied bail.

Vijendra is not alone. Hundreds of workers across Manesar and Noida face similar charges, swept up in mass arrests whose purpose is intimidation. In cases where the courts have conceded that bail can be granted, they have frequently imposed a financial guarantee equivalent to a month's wages or more, placing it far beyond the reach of the workers and their families.

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Pakistan, conspiracy and the Big Lie

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath led the campaign of lies meant to provide cover for the police's brutal suppression of the Noida workers' protests. He himself declared the workers' protests an "organized conspiracy" and levelled the explosive, communally laced charge of a possible "Pakistan connection." Noida Police Commissioner Laxmi Singh dutifully elaborated, claiming the violence was a "mala fide, internationally organized activity," again without a shred of evidence. This is the language of authoritarian governments everywhere: when workers organize, accuse them of foreign subversion. When that fails, invoke national security.

Adityanath's government has done exactly that, invoking the NSA to target social activists who supported the worker agitation.

Modeled on British colonial-era preventive detention legislation enacted to suppress the independence movement, the NSA allows authorities to imprison individuals for up to 12 months without charge or trial. It is a mechanism of state terror, and it has now been deployed against workers' advocates whose "crime" was showing up to document and speak about what they witnessed.

Among those arrested and subjected to the NSA are: Aditya Anand, an unemployed software engineer, affiliated with a labour advocacy group named Mazdoor Bigul (Workers' Bugle); Rupesh Roy, an auto-rickshaw driver and labor activist; Manisha Chauhan, a worker herself; Himanshu Thakur, a student; Satyam Verma, a journalist, translator and writer; and Aakriti Choudhary, a theatre practitioner and artist.

Torture, fabrication and a compliant Supreme Court

The family and lawyers of Rupesh Roy issued a searing press release on April 25, describing in harrowing detail what awaited these activists in police custody. They allege he was subjected to "brutal custodial violence and sustained physical and psychological torture." Most damningly, Roy recounts being taken to the NSEZ protest site in Noida—after he had already been in custody for over 36 hours, meaning he could not possibly have participated in the April 13 events—where police planted kerosene bottles and torch sticks, then forced him to pick them up while videographing him. "I was taken to a spot behind the bushes where kerosene bottles were planted along with *mashaal* (torch or flambeau) sticks," Roy stated. "The police forced me to pick up these mashaals and kerosene bottles while they videographed me."

Aditya Anand, whom police have labelled the "mastermind" of the violence on April 13, was illegally transported from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh by UP Police after a local Tamil Nadu magistrate refused to grant transit remand, making his arrest patently unlawful. Yet when the matter reached India's Supreme Court, the bench of Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan—despite hearing directly from Aditya and Rupesh about their torture, and despite Justice Bhuyan himself acknowledging that "the accused should not be treated in such a manner"—ordered them to remain in judicial custody under the anti-democratic provisions of the NSA. "Law has to take its course," the court intoned.

The court was further informed that police had infiltrated the very WhatsApp group they now cite as evidence of conspiracy, meaning state agents may well have participated in, or themselves authored, the "inciting" messages used to justify these imprisonments. The Supreme Court declined to treat this revelation with the urgency it demands.

In the Manesar case, the prosecution's evidence against Vijendra rests substantially on WhatsApp messages sent from a phone registered in his name. His lawyers have argued these messages could have been sent by any of the multiple occupants of the shared accommodation where he lives. The court dismissed this defense at the bail stage, finding "prima facie" evidence sufficient to keep the 20-year-old worker in prison.

Notably, the court itself acknowledged—in an inadvertent moment of candor—that violent incidents by participants "had always weakened" a protest "movement when it were on its peak."

A cheap-labour haven, maintained by force

What unifies every thread of this story—the mass arrests in Manesar and Noida, the NSA detentions, the torture, the fabricated evidence, the denied bail—is the logic of capital. India's ruling class, its BJP government, its state-level administrations across party lines, and its judiciary have made a collective decision: the country's comparative advantage in the global capitalist order is its vast reserve of desperately poor, politically-suppressed labor. Workers earning ?11,000 (US $115) a month producing garments, electronics, and auto components for transnational corporations are the foundation of India's pitch to foreign investors. Any disruption of that arrangement—any successful wage demand, any rank-and-file movement or independent union, any militant worker agitation—must be crushed before it spreads.

The nexus of central and state governments, the police and the courts has made a deliberate, coordinated decision to maintain India as a cheap-labour haven for domestic and transnational capital alike. They are aided and abetted at every turn by the corporate media and by the official government-recognized unions that systematically isolate workers' struggles and keep them confined within the state-designed, pro-employer collective bargaining system. Just as they took no meaningful action to defend the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers, for fear it would disrupt their cozy relationship with the Congress Party and the political establishment as a whole, so the CITU and AITUC are mounting no campaign to mobilize workers across India to come to the defence of the Noida and Manesar workers and the jailed leftists and social activists.

The working class has only one answer to this: it must take up their defence and make it an integral part of the struggle to build new independent organizations of working-class struggle— rank-and-file committees—that refuse to accept the subordination of worker rights to capitalist profit and fight for the international unity of workers on a socialist program.

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