Swelling student protests rattle India's far-right government

Yuan Darwin, Saman Gunadasa, Keith Jones
23 July 2026

A protest movement initiated last month by the newly-founded Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) has drawn tens of thousands of students, unemployed youth and young professionals into the streets of India's capital and thrown the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) into increasing crisis.

The immediate trigger for the protests was a corruption scandal surrounding one of the punishing, highly socially unequal, government-administered university entrance exams. However, the movement has become a flashpoint for far broader social anger—over the lack of employment opportunities, endemic poverty and the ever-growing chasm between the mass of the population and a tiny layer of rich and super-rich.

The protest movement took on heightened significance this week, when tens of thousands defied a government ban on their marching on the parliament buildings. True to its violent and authoritarian instincts, the Modi regime responded with ferocious police repression—tear gas, baton charges, mass detentions and the deployment of thousands of paramilitary forces.

The youth agitation follows an uprising in April of thousands of brutally exploited workers in Noida, on the outskirts of New Delhi, and in the town of Manesar in the neighboring state of Haryana. Workers in both industrial townships have been criminalized and thrown into prison just for demanding a livable wage.

India's student youth face bleak prospects on every front: Either they are denied access to higher education through a college-entrance system rotten with corruption thereby limiting them from the outset to poverty wages; or upon graduation they confront a labour market that offers most degree-holders gig work, unemployment or underemployment.

The Indian government's own Labour Force Survey has found that the country's unemployment rate is the highest it has been in 45 years, a figure so politically explosive that the Modi government initially suppressed it. Of the more than 10 million young people entering the labour market each year, only a tiny fraction secure formal sector employment. This is not an accident or a temporary dysfunction—It is the structural outcome of a capitalist order that generates spectacular wealth for 229 billionaires, whose combined net worth exceeds $1 trillion, while condemning a generation to permanent precarity.

The origins of the protest movement

The immediate roots of the current agitation can be traced to June 6, when thousands of demonstrators gathered in Delhi, India's capital, for the first major public event of a new movement calling itself the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP)—founded as the result of the mass response to an anti-establishment social media meme. After holding protest marches in several other major cities, the CJP launched a continuous sit-in protest at Jantar Mantar in central Delhi on June 20. Eight days later, environmental and education reform activist Sonam Wangchuk began an indefinite hunger strike at the protest site in solidarity with the students.

The CJP's primary demand is the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the systematic fraud exposed in the government-administered National Eligibility cum Entrance Test—universally known as NEET—as well as the Central Board of Secondary Education examinations.

The initial spark was the revelation that examination questions for the NEET medical college entrance exam on May 3 had been leaked by politically well-connected, student-coaching businesses. NEET is a mandatory, brutally competitive examination through which over 2.3 million students compete annually for a mere 136,000 medical college seats. The examination was subsequently cancelled and rescheduled for June 21. The consequences were devastating: At least 12 young people, their hopes crushed and their years of preparation rendered worthless, took their own lives.

The name "Cockroach Janata Party" is a spoof of the name of the ruling Bharatiya Janata (Indian People's) Party and a product of the growing social rage. On May 15, India's Chief Justice Surya Kant made remarks from the Supreme Court bench denouncing the tens of millions of unemployed Indian youth as "parasites" and "cockroaches." The contempt was not incidental—It was a naked expression of the utter disdain with which the ruling class views the masses of young people it has failed and discarded. Moreover, it was popularly recognized as such. India's youth have transformed the slur into a symbol of defiance—even if the CJP itself does not go beyond the bounds of establishment politics and has sought to confine the protest movement to the most limited demands.

"Sansad Chalo": Tens of thousands march on Parliament

On Monday, July 20, tens of thousands of demonstrators attempted a "Sansad Chalo"—March to Parliament—timed to coincide with the opening day of the parliament's "Monsoon Session" in a show of defiance of the Modi government.

Rattled by the scale and determination of the CJP-led movement, the government had preemptively criminalized the march and widely broadcast its ban in the hopes of intimidating the protesters.

But when this manifestly failed, the Delhi police, acting on the government's orders, met them with a brutal show of force. Massive contingents of security personnel had been deployed to block the march before it could reach the Parliament. Police fired tear gas into crowds of demonstrators and launched repeated baton charges, indiscriminately beating young men and women who had gathered peacefully. Numerous

© World Socialist Web Site

protesters were detained, and over 200 persons were so severely beaten that they suffered from broken bones, deep skull lacerations and toxic levels of exposure to tear gas. A 21-year-old girl was so badly injured she has had to receive treatment in an ICU.

Several Delhi Metro stations were temporarily closed in a deliberate attempt to choke off the flow of demonstrators into the city centre, while sweeping restrictions were imposed across parts of the capital, turning New Delhi into something resembling a city under siege.

Conspicuous among those who joined the Sansad Chalo were a number of courageous youth who had to wear bandages wrapped around their heads to cover the wounds police had inflicted on them the night before, when police violently cleared the Jantar Mantar protest site.

In the wake of Monday's events, the protest movement has continued to grow, with the sit-in re-established at the Jantar Mantar protest site and sympathy protests held in a number of cities, including Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad and Patna. In the latter city, the capital of Bihar, India's second most populous state, police savagely attacked a demonstration of tens of thousands on Wednesday.

On Thursday, Modi broke his silence on the youth agitation. In a short social media post he feigned concern for India's youth and promised to set up a so-called "fast-track" court to punish those responsible for national examination leaks, of which there have been scores over the past decade.

The government is also dangling an offer of resuming the talks it held with CJP representatives on Monday.

CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke has thus far refused. A Boston University student who previously had ties to the Aam Aadmi (Common Man's) Party, a right-wing capitalist party, Dipke has hitherto been at pains to limit the protest movement to the single issue of the NEET exam leak and the call for the Education Minister's resignation. No demands have been raised to address the chronic underfunding of post-secondary education or the derisory amounts of student assistance, let alone demands which if implemented would encroach on the fortunes of the rich and the tens of billions of dollars (trillions of rupees) squandered on the military so as to expand vitally needed public services and provide employment.

But Dipke clearly feels the ground shifting under his feet and the need, for the moment, to identify himself with the young protesters' hostility to the government, which was further enflamed by Monday's repression. "Modi ji," said Dipke employing an Indian honorific, "I once again request you to accept Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation. Otherwise, the issue will not remain limited to Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation alone; it will come for your resignation also."

The *Indian Express* revealed yesterday that the Delhi police have been instructed to exercise powers granted to them under the National Security Act, 1980 (NSA). This "authorization" was granted on July 15 itself and set to last for three months from July 19 to October 18. Under this draconian act, police can jail without formal charge—for up to a year—anyone deemed "acting in any manner prejudicial to the security of the State, or to the maintenance of Public order, or to the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the community."

Modi's chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah—the architect of some of the most repressive measures in post-independence Indian history—has moved to escalate the state's repressive response further still. He has mobilised thousands of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel and Rapid Action Force (RAF) units, deploying them across the capital.

This paramilitary mobilisation against unarmed young protesters reveals the fear at the heart of the Modi government. This is a regime that sits atop a political and social volcano—and it knows it.

Its greatest fear, as indicated in April's savage attack on the Noida workers' protest, is that the student agitation will serve as the catalyst for an eruption of working class opposition.

Opposition parties scramble to exploit and contain the youth agitation

India's bourgeois opposition parties—led, above all, by the Congress Party and its grandly named but politically hollow "INDIA" alliance—have rushed to position themselves as champions of the protesting students and youth. The day after the police attack on the banned July 20 "Sansad Chalo" march, Rahul Gandhi, that hereditary symbol of India's dynastic bourgeois "opposition party," made a show of supporting the students. He and other Congress leaders staged a march to Modi's official residence. There he was briefly detained by Delhi police.

Far from being an alternative to the BJP's class war on the working people of India, the Congress Party is a co-architect of it. The Congress and its INDIA alliance—which is comprised of an assortment of right-wing, ethno-nationalist and caste-ist parties, and the Stalinist parliamentary partners (the CPM and CPI)—advocate for an alternative right-wing capitalist government. One that would be committed, like that led by Modi, to anti-worker, pro-investor reform and to New Delhi's anti-China war alliance with US imperialism.

The organizations historically identified as the "left"—the CPM and CPI, and the trade unions, including the Stalinist-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and All-India Trades Union Congress (AITUC)—are rightly widely discredited. In the name of opposing the Hindu supremacist BJP, they have for decades systematically suppressed the class struggle, supporting right-wing governments at the Centre, imposing what they themselves describe as pro-investor policies in the states where they hold office and isolating militant workers' struggles.

Both the Noida workers' agitation and the current student protest movement erupted outside the traditional establishment structures, the unions and the ostensible opposition parties. This is a reflection of the depth of the social crisis and the popular alienation with the entire establishment, "left" and right, and carries within it the seeds of something genuinely threatening to the BJP government and the capitalist ruling class as a whole.

But it also poses the central danger—as already evidenced in the politics of the CJP leadership—with which every such movement is confronted. Unless aimed at mobilising the working class on a socialist and internationalist program, mass protests, however militant and defiant, remain vulnerable to being brought under the control, diverted and ultimately dissipated by bourgeois and pseudo-left political forces. That is what happened to the mass uprising in Sri Lanka in 2022.

The intense competition and squalid corruption surrounding India's entrance exams, like the more fundamental problems of mass poverty and unemployment, are social ills rooted in the global crisis of capitalism. Changing what needs to be changed, India's "rise"—much vaunted by the BJP government and the corporate media—mirrors developments across the globe and especially in the US, the centre of global capitalism. Society is rent by unprecedented and growing social inequality; an oligarchical ruling class is embracing far-right authoritarianism; and the rights of working people are under relentless attack, while the government declares that there is "no money" for public services even as it pours massive resources into rearmament and war.

Socialist-minded youth must fight to turn the protest movement to the working class, beginning with the workers in Noida and the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt. It is the working class that has the social power to defeat the Modi government and to transform society to make social equality its guiding principle. But if this power is to be mobilised, the working class must forge its political independence from all the pro-capitalist parties, including the Stalinists, and rally the oppressed toilers

© World Socialist Web Site

behind it in the fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of society. This requires building new organizations of class struggle, independent rank-and-file committees, and above all a revolutionary working class, that is, Trotskyist, party.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site