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Farmers protesting Modi's pro-agribusiness laws clash with security forces on streets of India's capital

Farmers protesting against the Modi government's pro-agribusiness laws clashed with Delhi Police and paramilitary forces in multiple places in India's capital yesterday, after defying government orders limiting their protest, including that they not enter the city centre. The violence left one farmer dead and scores of others injured. Delhi Police, who attacked the farmers with tear gas volleys and *lathi* charges, said that more than 80 of their own personnel were injured.



An elderly farmer shouts slogans while others listen to a speaker as they block a major highway during a protest at the Delhi-Haryana state border, India, Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

The police claimed that Navneet Singh, a 24-year-old farmer from Uttar Pradesh, died when his tractor flipped over. Protesters countered that Singh lost control of his tractor because he had been shot by security forces.

Rattled by the explosion of social anger, India's Home Ministry ordered mobile phone and internet coverage shutdown for up to 12 hours in large parts of the capital, as well as adjacent areas in the neighbouring states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

By late afternoon, the farmers had returned to the makeshift camps at a half dozen major entry points into India's capital territory, where upwards of 200,000 of them have lived since they government used a massive deployment of state security forces and violence to bar them from entering Delhi in late November.

Shaken by yesterday's events, the government has reportedly ordered large numbers of additional security forces be deployed to Delhi, and placed Haryana and the Punjab, from where many of the protesting farmers hail, under "high alert."

With the support of the corporate media, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government are accusing the farmers of running amok and bringing anarchy to India's capital. "Capital anarchy: Farmers deviating from peaceful protest route severely discredits their movement," thundered the editorial page of the *Times of India*.

The government had tried to get yesterday's tractor parade banned by the Supreme Court. India's highest court, apprehensive about appearing to be nothing more than a rubber stamp for Modi's every authoritarian action and communalist outrage, instead told the Delhi Police to set strict "security" limits on the parade.

Anxious to appear cooperative, the farmer unions bowed to the Delhi Police's demand that yesterday's tractor parade begin only after the conclusion of the official celebrations marking India's Jan. 26 Republic Day holiday. They also agreed to limit the number of tractors that would enter the city to just 5,000, and to confine the protest to three police-designated routes designed to keep the farmers far from the city centre.

The farmers rebelled, however. Hours before the police-farm union stipulated start time, farmers—some on foot, others riding on tractors that were often emblazoned with Indian and farm union flags—set out for the capital. Security forces responded with violence, but it appears they were overwhelmed by the sheer size of the crowds. Tractors were used to push aside the barricades the police had set up to keep the farmers penned into the three police-designated parade routes.

Farmers who spoke to the media said that they were angered at not being able to march freely in India's capital on the holiday that marks the entry into force of India's constitution. "Delhi isn't just for ministers, it is our capital too," Dharminder Singh, who comes from the Patiala district of the Punjab, told the news website *Scroll.in*. "They kept us at the border for two months. That's not fair. We are a democracy. It is our right to protest in the capital."

In an action of symbolic significance, a group of protesting farmers reached the Mughal-era Red Fort, from where India's prime ministers deliver the annual Independence Day address, and hung a union flag atop it.

Over the past two months the farmers have endured inclement weather; been the target of government smears, including that their agitation is being supported by China and Pakistan, and manipulated by Sikh separatists; and been repeatedly rebuffed by Modi and his minions with the claim that government's three agriculture reform laws are for the good of the farmers.

In reality, Modi's "farm reform" is part of a raft of pro-investor measures long demanded by domestic and Indian capital. It was rammed through parliament in September in the same abbreviated Monsoon session of parliament that amended India's labour laws to make most strikes illegal, further expand precarious contract labour jobs and empower large companies to lay off workers at will.

The farm laws will place India's farmers, most of whom scrape out a living on plots of just two hectares (about five acres) or less, at the mercy of agribusiness.

The farm union leaders were quick to condemn yesterday's violence, claiming it was carried out by "antisocial elements." The *Samyukta Kisan Morcha*, an umbrella group representing some 40 different farmers' organizations, issued a statement declaring, "Despite all our efforts, some organisations and individuals have violated the route and indulged in condemnable acts. Antisocial elements had infiltrated the otherwise peaceful movement."

Led by better-off farmers, the farm unions have insisted throughout that the farmers' agitation is "non-political," i.e., is not a challenge to the Modi government. They have raised no

demands to address the needs of the landless and agricultural workers who comprise the majority of India's rural masses.

The farmers' agitation has nonetheless won widespread support among the impoverished marginal farmers and agricultural workers, and among working people across India. It is recognized that in attacking the farmers, Modi and his government are doing the bidding of big business.

The opposition parties, including the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI), have echoed the press and government condemnations of "violence." "Violence in no form is an answer & is unacceptable," tweeted CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury.

The furor within the political establishment and corporate media over yesterday's events exemplifies the hypocrisy and fear of India's venal capitalist ruling elite—and not only because nothing was said about the state violence directed against the farmers, beginning with the government's attempt to smother their agitation at its outset through mass arrests, violence and the imposition of Article 144 of the Criminal Code, under which all assemblies of more than four people are banned.

The Indian bourgeoisie visits violence on the country's workers and toilers every day, by condemning them to unspeakable want and squalor. While the elite celebrates India's purported capitalist rise, almost 38 percent of children suffer from stunting and, according to the World Global Hunger Index, 9 out of every 10 Indian infants do not have access to a nutritious diet.

As a result of their ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 150,000 people—assuredly a gross underestimate—have officially died, and hundreds of millions have seen their meagre incomes slashed. During this same period, India's billionaires saw their wealth increase by 35 percent. Even before this, the wealth of India's top 1 percent was four times more than the resources of the country's bottom 70 percent, more than 950 million people.

The farmers' agitation is an expression of growing mass opposition to the Modi government and to the socially incendiary pro-investor policies that all sections of the political establishment—from the BJP and Congress Party to the Stalinist CPM and CPI—have pursued for the past three decades. On November 26, the same day that the farmers' Delhi *Chalo* (Let's go to Delhi) agitation was launched, tens of millions of workers joined a one-day general strike to oppose the BJP government's privatization drive and labour and farm "reform" laws. Moreover, numerous smaller strikes have erupted over unpaid salaries; employer demands for speed-up, as in the ongoing walkout of 3,000 workers at Toyota's car assembly plant near Bangalore; and among health care workers to secure personal protective equipment.

It is this that makes the policies of the Stalinists, who continue to wield considerable influence through their control of the CITU and AITUC trade union apparatuses, so perfidious. They are doing everything they can to tie the mass opposition to Modi to the Congress Party and other right-wing opposition parties, and to prevent the working class from intervening in the political crisis provoked by the farmers' determined agitation as an independent force, rallying the rural masses behind it on the basis of a socialist program against the BJP government and Indian capitalism.

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