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Modi government unleashes massive police-military crackdown against farmers' protest

India's Narendra Modi-led, far-right BJP government has launched a massive state security operation to crush a farmers' protest already joined by over 100,000 farmers and farm laborers. The crackdown has involved tens of thousands of police and para-militaries, the erection of huge multi-layered blockades at state borders, and drone-delivered tear-gas strikes.

The farmers are demanding the Modi government fulfill a promise to establish a minimum support price (MSP) for basic crops.

That promise was extracted from the government at the conclusion of a year-long farmer's protest, the 2020-21 "Let's go to Delhi" (Dilli Chalo) movement. For thirteen months, tens of thousands of farmers camped on the outskirts of India's National Capital Territory to demand the repeal of three recently adopted pro-agri business laws. Ultimately, the government was forced to beat a retreat and pledged to repeal some of the offending legislation, but it has since reneged on key promises.



Farmers run for cover after police fired tear gas to disperse protesting farmers who were marching to New Delhi near the Punjab-Haryana border at Shambhu, India, Tuesday, Feb.13, 2024. [AP Photo/Rajesh Sachar]

Working in tandem with BJP state governments, Modi is determined to prevent a reprise of the 2020-21 mobilization, lest it derail his bid for a third term in office in India's general elections which are to be held this spring .

On Monday, the day before the protest was to begin, the BJP state government in Haryana, which lies between Delhi and Punjab, the northwest Indian state where the farmers' agitation is centered, implemented a raft of repressive measures. These included deploying 114 companies of paramilitaries and state police to districts adjacent to Punjab, blockading key roads and placing much of the state under Section 144 of the Criminal Code, which outlaws all public gatherings of four or more people. The government has also suspended mobile and internet services across much of the state through Feb. 15.

When farmers from Punjab reached the border with Haryana yesterday, they were confronted by barricades comprised of large concrete slabs and containers and barbed wire spread across the roads to prevent them from proceeding. Nails were also laid to puncture the tires of tractors and other vehicles as protesters passed. Like measures were taken at the border between Haryana and Delhi, with some 50,000 police deployed to prevent protesting farmers from entering the capital territory. The Delhi police are under the control of the BJP central government even though the territory is governed by the opposition AAP.

Violent clashes soon erupted between the security forces and farmers. Haryana state police fired tear gas shells at farmers as they reached the Shambhu border crossing between Punjab and Haryana. At a crossing from Haryana into Delhi, media reported Special Commissioner of Police Ravindra Yadav inciting police via a bullhorn, "We have to fire tear gas shells, use lathis (batons) and save ourselves.

At the end of the day, peasant/farmer representatives told a press conference, "Around 60 of our men have sustained injuries. The government is provoking us by attacking us with tear gas shells and rubber bullets." Farmers' leader Sarwan Singh Pandher called Tuesday, "a black day" in the "history of India. It is shameful the way the Modi government attacked farmers and farm leaders."

The BJP government intended to commandeer a stadium in Delhi to detention protesting farmers *en masse* if they had succeed in entering the capital. However, the local AAP

government refused to make it available, declaring that the issues over which the farmers were protesting were legitimate.

Ahead of Tuesday's protest, police had already arrested hundreds of farmers at various places. For example, Madhya Pradesh police detained farmers who were heading to Delhi at the Bhopal railway station and in several other places on Sunday night. Madhya Pradesh farmer leader Anil Yadav and another leader were thrown in jail. A few days earlier, police brutally attacked a protest march on parliament by hundreds of farmers from Noida and Greater Noida in Uttar Pradesh.

The Delhi police, for their part, have imposed prohibitory orders banning the entry for a month of any procession of tractors, trucks or other vehicles. *The Hindu* reported an order issued by Police Commissioner Sanjay Arore as proclaiming, "There will be a complete restriction on assembly of people, rallies and entry of tractor trolleys carrying people."

The Modi government is determined to quash the farmer protest movement at the outset for fear that it will become a rallying point for mass opposition just as it is about to formally launch its campaign for re-election.

Backed by the most powerful sections of the Indian bourgeoisie and the corporate media and exploiting the spineless and right-wing character of its opponents within the political establishment, the Modi government has sought to project an image of political invincibility based on its supposed mass support.

An ongoing mass protest of farmers in India's capital would put the lie to this false narrative, as well as to the associated fiction that under Modi India is experiencing rapid economic development and quickly becoming a "middle-income" country. In reality, the fruits of India's capitalist growth have been monopolized by a thin crust of the most privileged layers of Indian society. Today the richest 1 percent of Indians own more than 40 percent of all the country's wealth, while the bottom 50 percent, more than 700 million people, own just 3 percent.

The Modi government resorted to brutal repression throughout the 2020-21 farmer protests, although ultimately it determined that an all-out clash with the farmers was too political risky under conditions where they enjoyed huge support within the working class and among rural toilers across India.

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The BJP government filed multiple legal cases against farmers and farm union leaders, while harassing and arresting activists who extended support to the farmers protests. Over 200 farmers died at the protest site from heart attacks, cold, COVID-19 and other illnesses. Among the farmers killed during the protest were four who died after being run over by a vehicle driven by the son of Union Minister Ajay Mishra.

In 2024, the Modi and BJP state governments are determined to crush the farmers' agitation before it even begins. At the same time, as it did in 2021, it is trying to divide the various farmer organizations—most of which have ties to the opposition parties and are generally led by better-off farmers—with false promises.

The Modi government confirmed late Tuesday it has agreed to a third round of talks with the farmer unions. This is expected to take place Wednesday. However, on the substance of the dispute, the government has made it clear that it intends to cede no ground, by repeatedly insisting on the “difficulties” in instituting MSP.

“We are not averse to discussions,” said K.V. Biju, a senior leader of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (United Farmers' Front)-Non Political or SKM-NP. “We will wait for the outcome of (the talks) and if they fail, farmers will breach the blockades and will start marching to Delhi.” A split-off from the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (United Farmers' Front), which came into being during the 2020-21 farmers' movement agitation, the SKM-NP is one of the two main organizations leading the current agitation. The other is the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha or KMM.

In a joint action with some central trade union federations, the protesting farmer groups have called for a Grameen Bharat Bandh on February 16, during which they will suspend supply and purchase of vegetables and other crops and close government officers, and state-owned and private industry.

As would be expected, the opposition parties are trying to capitalise on the farmers' protest to salvage their flagging electoral hopes. On Tuesday Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi claimed, “If INDIA alliance forms the government, we will give MSPs legal guarantee.”

Led by the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance is a right-wing electoral comprised of some two dozen parties, including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI). While it denounces the

Hindu supremacist BJP for betraying “secularism,” INDIA itself connives with the Hindu right and like the BJP supports further “pro-investor reform” and the anti-China Indo-US military-strategic alliance.

Significantly, farmer spokesmen Sarwan Singh Pandher, has dismissed the Congress’ claims to support the agitation for the MSP. “Congress Party,” he declared Tuesday, “does not support us.” No doubt expressing the sentiments of many farmers, he noted that the Congress Party had never introduced MSP in all the years it led India’s government: “We consider Congress equally responsible as much as the BJP. These laws were brought by Congress itself. We are not in favour of anyone, we raise the voice of farmers.”