India: Farmers' march sparks new mass movement against Modi

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Hundreds of thousands of farmers from all over India started the Delhi Chalo (Let us go to Delhi) March on November 25 at the behest of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, which consists of 300 farmers' organisations. The march is supported by rural labourers, transportation workers and important sectors for the working class.

Hundreds of thousands have joined it, aiming to reach Delhi for a mass gathering, demanding the repeal of new laws, which will further impoverish small farmers, agricultural workers and the mass of the rural population to the benefit of large scale capitals. Police and paramilitary forces repeatedly attacked the marchers with batons, tear gas and water cannon, injuring several farmers.

This has not broken their determination. Between 28 November and 3 December, the number of farmers blocking Delhi in the Delhi Chalo was estimated to be between 150 and 300 thousand. They called for a shutdown of India on December 8. Eleven opposition political parties, including the Congress and the Communist Party, backed the call.

The farmers' strike is being supported by labour organisations, students and women from all over the country and protests have been organised in solidarity with the farmers' sit-in. On many occasions, the determination has been expressed with slogans for freedom and revolution and to continue the struggle until the demands are approved. Transport workers have also joined the sit-in so more roads towards Delhi will be closed.

Not only has the Modi government failed to stop the farmers' march, but its entire policy of distribution and governance has failed and been exposed. The talks of Agriculture Minister Tomar with the farmers have been fruitless so far, despite ongoing government propaganda in the media claiming that the new laws will stimulate development and the wellbeing of society.

The Delhi Chalo March and the farmers' sit-in are directed against the Indian government's introduction of neoliberal legislation in the name of reform that will leave them at the mercy of agrarian and financial capitalists. Farmers are demanding the removal of three controversial bills, which would end minimum support price. This price, set by the government, ensures a minimum price for the products of the farmers. According to the new law, the sale and pricing of agricultural commodities will be subject to market forces and the prices of private capital and corporate sector are willing to pay. This is likely to lead to economic massacre of small peasants and farmers through hoarding and other means.

Similarly, farmers are demanding the withdrawal of electricity amendment bill. This will stop the supply of free electricity to the farmers. The third demand of the farmers is to repeal the legislation imposing a penalty of five years imprisonment or a fine of Rs 10 million on those who set fire to the fields.
Farmers in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and other states have been opposing the laws for months. Apart from strikes in Punjab against this, railway services were also suspended under the Rail Stop strategy.

Although anti-peasant bills are being introduced in the name of abolishing feudal rule, in reality they strengthen the role of big corporations who will be able to manipulate prices by stockpiling and transferring supplies between different states. They have provided opportunities to big capitalists like Mukesh Ambani, owner of the petrochemical giant Reliance Industries, and Gautam Adani, head of the Adani group, who have funded BJP, to reap the benefits of these reforms in agriculture. These reforms have already resulted in rising food prices for workers and exacerbated the plight of the poor who already spend most of their income on food.

Inflation

The Consumer Food Price Index rose by 11.07 per cent in October, while retail inflation rose to 7.61 per cent, the highest in the last six years — both illustrating the rising burden on peasants and workers throughout the country. At the same time, this provided opportunities for large capitals and traders to create artificial shortages in the market, which multiplied food prices and, therefore, their profit margins. Since the Modi government has destroyed the public distribution system to prevent the people from buying food grains at discounted rates, the majority of the population has to depend on the open market for food grains and vegetables.

All this has to be seen against the background of a dramatic recession in India. In the first quarter of the financial year (April ? June), GDP declined by 23.9 percent. On November 27, the National Statistics Office published its GDP report for the second quarter of the current fiscal year (July ? September), which showed a 7.5 percent decline in GDP. This is a contraction of historic dimensions. This has sharpened the social divisions of society at the same time. There is a sharp rise in poverty and unemployment on the one hand and, on the other, huge investments. According to the IMF, India's profits have increased due to government packages and anti-labour and anti-farmer policies.

The one-day general strike on November 26, which rallied a historic 250 million workers, peasants and poor according to the trade unions, and the Delhi Chalo March, have shown the anger of the working class and the unity of the peasants, workers and students. However, the December 8 India shutdown was not enough to win the demands of workers and farmers. Negotiations on December 9th brought no results, and the mass protest wave continues with further sit-ins and road blocks, involving hundreds of thousands, if not millions, till 14th December.

The impressive strikes of the working class in India in recent years are also a clear manifestation of the fact that the crisis and mass mobilisations can shake the Modi government and its capitalist agenda. Privatisation, anti-labour and anti-peasant laws, increasing profits and reducing the wages, legal protections and conditions of the working class are all part of a larger capitalist onslaught.

Government

The general strike of 26th November as well as the growing movement of farmers, small peasants and rural labourers and the collaboration between trade unions and farmers’ organisations point to the development of a force, which could not only repeal the government laws, but also the Hindu-chauvinist Modi government and its agenda.

In order to bring such a movement about, the trade unions need to go beyond one-day strikes and expressions of solidarity with the farmers. There is a need for permanent resistance to the anti-labour and
anti-peasant laws, and indefinite strikes in cities and villages for minimum wages and salaries and a mass peasant revolt against agrarian capital.

Trade unions and farmers' organisations are fighting Modi's onslaught with courage. They should call for the formation of struggle committees at work, district level, neighbourhoods and villages, including labourers, small and medium farmers and landless peasants. There is no need to discriminate on the basis of religion, nationality, caste and gender. Self-defence units need to be formed to defend the movement against state repression and attacks by reactionary Hindu extremists.

A general political strike and a peasant revolt that permanently paralyses the country would inevitably raise the question of power and thus give rise to the possibility and necessity of moving from a defensive struggle to an offensive one. It is true that this requires going beyond the trade union struggle.

Combining this struggle with the struggle against all forms of oppression, the struggle against the BJP government with the struggle against capitalism points to the need for a revolutionary political party of the working class whose programme is based on transitional demands. Such a party will be able to win the rural population if it takes up the demands of the peasants and fights for control of the land to those who work it, the peasants and the rural workers. Such a joint struggle would open the way for permanent revolution in India, culminating in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to establish the rule of councils, expropriate foreign and Indian large-scale capital and introduce a democratically planned economy. Only that would allow for organising the exchange between town and countryside to the benefit of both peasants and the urban population.

At present, there is no political force in India advocating such a programme at the national level. Congress, despite currently claiming to support the farmers and trade unions, is itself a capitalist party, which started many of the neo-liberal attacks Modi is currently trying to bring to their logical end. The communist parties have, in fact, ended the long struggle for the revolutionary abolition of capitalism, and the radical left is also confused and fragmented. We have to bring to the centre of the struggle the need for a party that can present a revolutionary governmental solution to the current political crisis.

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