India: Workers' and Farmers' Unity can halt Modi's neoliberal onslaught

Bernie McAdam Mon, 01/02/2021 - 21:49
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Indian farmers and farm labourers are engaged in a massive struggle to repeal three agricultural laws, passed by parliament in September, that will deregulate and further privatise the rural economy. In this struggle they have the support of India's working class, which in November once again broke its own record for the largest one-day general strike in history.

Over 300,000 farmers and their supporters are camped on the borders of New Delhi. They are resisting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's anti-farmer laws. On January 26, a march headed by thousands of tractors clashed with police in Delhi as protestors breached the barriers surrounding the historic Red Fort. Modi has tried to use the ?violence? to divide them from the huge public support they have been enjoying, especially from the unions and the working class.

At the time of the Green Revolution in the 1950s and 60s, the Congress government introduced a guaranteed ?minimum support price? or MSP, especially for rice and wheat sold via agricultural markets, run by the states, called mandis. Modi sees this system as a block to the complete capitalisation of agriculture and the expulsion of ?surplus? population from the countryside. Already Special Economic Zones, SEZs, have been created by the state grabbing land for industrial development. But they also include luxury housing for the country's growing middle class, with golf courses and private gardens where villages once stood.

Modi's regime and Hindutva ideology

This latest struggle against Modi's Hindu chauvinist government comes against a background of a devastated economy and a brutal and ill-managed response to the pandemic. In the initial March lockdown, tens of thousands of migrant workers were forced to walk hundreds of kilometres to their home villages as all transport was halted. Unemployment rocketed to 24%! The numbers of covid cases and deaths have spiralled, although many remain uncounted as several Indian states do not include suspected cases in the final count, against World Health Organisation advice.

When Modi's regime was elected in 2014, his victory was secured by only 30% of the vote but a landslide of seats thanks to the undemocratic first past the post system. Big business gave their blessing to Modi, believing that he could lead one of the fastest growing economies in the world to rival the feats of China and become Asia's second economic powerhouse.

Modi's background is in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, RSS, a paramilitary right wing Hindu nationalist group which has over 50,000 branches and arms training camps. It originated as an anti-British but fiercely Hindu and anti-Muslim group in the 1920?s. Heavily influenced by Mussolini and Hitler, it is now said to have a membership of 5 to 6 million now. Sangh Parivar is the umbrella term for a variety of
Hindu organisations spawned by the RSS, with the BJP being its political representative.

The RSS is based on a religious supremacist ideology, Hindutva, which threatens to plunge the second most populous country on earth, with a population of 1.36 bn, into devastating communalist conflict. It fights for a Hindu Rashtra (state) in a country with 200 million Muslims and 30 million Christians, condemning them to second class status, as well as increased oppression for Dalits, women and sexual minorities. When Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat he was widely blamed for fomenting the anti-Muslim riots of 2002, which saw over 1,000 Muslims murdered. Even US President Bush refused him entry into the States after this. Yet Obama soon reversed this after Modi became Prime Minister in 2014.

Hindutva is embodied in the Citizenship Amendment Act, CAA, passed in 2019. This allows migrants of any religion other than Islam to become Indian citizens. Combined with the National Register of Citizens, it could alter the whole basis of Indian citizenship, potentially disenfranchising millions of Muslims. The state of Assam, with its large immigrant population, has already been through the exercise. It is one of the poorest states where many citizens do not have identification paperwork and are vulnerable to detention and statelessness. Already many people native to Assam have been excluded from the registry.

The response to this attack was widespread protests across India from all backgrounds, particularly in the universities. This was met with police brutality and deaths of protestors. In the same year, Modi stripped Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim state, of the limited autonomy it had. The Indian army strengthened its occupation, and a state of emergency was declared. Protests were brutally put down. More recently, 8 states have passed anti-conversion laws targeting so called love jihad, whipping up fears that Muslim men are using marriage to convert Hindu women to Islam, in effect criminalising interfaith marriage.

It is important to recognise the real elements of fascism within the Sangh Parivar movement and the BJP. Clearly, the RSS has a long history of organising pogroms against Muslims, it is a paramilitary organisation and has a mass basis of cultural and sporting organisations. It is closely linked to state forces as well. Last year’s riots in Delhi were predominantly attacks on Muslim areas by Hindu mobs with many reports of police joining in. Most of the 53 dead were Muslim and the trigger appears to have been a BJP leader calling for the police to clear the streets after a sit in protest by women against the CAA.

Modi’s Economic Strategy
While these are characteristic of Modi’s Hindutva politics, his strategic aim was always to streamline Indian capitalism along lines acceptable to big business. The pressure for change along these lines accelerated after the 2008 global crisis, resulting in massive attacks on the working class and farmers. Chief among these are the vast array of new labour laws, designed to entice large global manufacturing companies into India, especially those that might want to avoid China.

Codes on wages, occupational health and safety, Industrial Relations and Social Security have been drawn up to cover 44 existing laws. One example is a new labour law that allows for the immediate dismissal of up to 300 workers without further explanation and without the approval of the authorities. Previously, this number was set at 100 workers. The laws curtail the rights of workers, increase the working day, open the road up to more privatisations and give more freedom to the bosses in pursuit of their profits.

Alongside these anti-labour laws, Modi has broadened his attacks on working people by targeting the farmers. Farmers are demanding the removal of three laws passed last September. The laws allow corporations to purchase crops, without fees or taxes, at market prices, thus ending minimum support price set by the government. It would lead to corporations stockpiling commodities in unlimited quantities and thereby being able to manipulate prices.
Similarly, farmers are demanding the withdrawal of the electricity amendment bill. This will stop the supply of free electricity to the farmers. They are also calling to repeal the legislation imposing a penalty of five years imprisonment or a fine of Rs 10 million on farmers who have no alternative to the traditional way of clearing their fields with fire. 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.

Historic General Strikes
The response to these new draconian laws by numerous regional and trade union organisations was the call for a general strike on November 26, which became the biggest ever. Over 250 million workers and farmers joined the one-day strike, paralysing the economy. This was the year's second general strike. Public and private sector workers joined together alongside many farmers? unions and students as demonstrations and rallies took place throughout the country.

Over 250 farmers' organisations, united in the All-India Farmers' Struggle Coordination Committee, supported the general strike and the unions gave their support to the farmers? ?Chalo Delhi? (Go to Delhi) mobilisation on 26 and 27 November. Hundreds of thousands of farmers organised in 31 unions joined this march, aided by students and transportation workers.

At the beginning of December, between 150 and 300 thousand blocked Delhi, with support from Congress and Communist Parties. Police and paramilitary forces have repeatedly attacked the march, with tear gas, batons and water cannons.

Many of the farmers are from Punjab and Haryana but there have been protests and support from farmers across the vast country, including in Western Uttar Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Two months later, farmers and their families are still arriving, with camps set up at the various borders of Delhi complete with Langars or communal kitchens. Over 50 deaths have occurred, due to cold, heart attacks and even suicides.

Despite government attempts to label the marchers as ?terrorists?, Maoists or separatists, the movement has shown an amazing degree of inter communal and inter caste solidarity. It started off with Sikh farmers and labourers but soon mobilised Hindus and Muslims across India. The main slogan of the march is "Kisan-Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad", Long Live Farmer-Labourer Unity, which also expresses solidarity between the Jats, a community who in Punjab constitute 25 per cent of the state?s population but own most of the land, and the Dalits, who constitute 32 percent of Punjab?s population and own only 2.3 percent of the agricultural land and are mostly farm labourers. There have previously been sharp struggles between Jats and Dalits over access to communal lands.

On 26 January, an enormous march, including thousands of tractors and motorbikes, drove into Delhi on Republic Day breaking through police barriers, with some invading the famous Red Fort. Marchers returned to the camps, but the press launched a hysterical campaign blaming the farmers for violence. This is preparing the ground for a state attack on the camps

In the aftermath of the tractor march, the state government ordered the protestors to vacate the Ghazipur camp and sent in the riot police. After a standoff, the police retreated. At the Singhu camp, 200 men from Hindu Sena, a far right Hindu chauvinist group, attacked farmers with suspected police connivance but were repelled by the farmers.

Clearly the struggle is approaching a critical stage. The government has been stringing out negotiations endlessly in the hope that demoralisation and weariness set in. Right now, there is a need for the working class and their unions to offer a lead in this crisis; one that goes beyond one day strikes and expressions
of solidarity with the farmers. There needs to be joint and permanent resistance to the anti-farmer and anti-labour laws, combined with a struggle against low wages and the effects of the pandemic.

An indefinite political general strike has to be mounted by the unions; one that can paralyse the economy until Modi caves in. Trade unions and farmer organisations should set up workplace and village/district councils of action that can democratically organise and lead such a strike. Democratic bodies like this can draw on the vast reserves of anger at Modi and the big capitalist and multinational land grabbers. They can become a rallying point against all forms of oppression including caste and national oppression. They can be a barrier against all those who incite communalist hatreds.

In the face of state repression and Hindu chauvinist attacks, it is vital that adequate self-defence is organised on an inter-communal basis. If this is done, the movement can force the unconditional withdrawal of Modi’s laws, and his anti-labour measures as well. It could then take the offensive, turning itself into the struggle to oust Modi and open the road to a workers’ and farmers’ government which can develop India’s industry, agriculture and services on a democratically planned basis.

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