

Lessons for Others - Two Struggles in a Changing India: Bombay Mill Strikes and Farmers' Agitation

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The repeal of the three farm laws introduced by the Modi government is a necessary but far from sufficient condition to decisively improve Indian agriculture and the lives of those connected to it. Yet, even if some compromise is struck instead of repeal, it will significantly breach the popularity of the Modi regime. ACHIN VANAIAK explains why.

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THE ongoing struggle of farmers in India is the most significant mass mobilisation in decades and represents the biggest challenge to the Modi government since it first came to power. Its cause: the three agricultural-reform laws forced through Parliament during the lockdown, which the BJP insists are necessary to modernise an archaic and outdated system.

Farmers, however, rightly see the dismantling of existing regulation, price controls, and public procurement commitments as imperilling their livelihoods.

They fear that opening up the sector corporate agri-businesses and financial interests will lead to more polarisation of landholdings with a large-scale displacement of farmers and labourers into an informal sector (over 90% of the total workforce) already incapable of providing enough or adequately remunerative employment.

Since late November 2020, hundreds of thousands of farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, have camped on the outskirts of Delhi disrupting the main roads into the capital. Rejecting offers to suspend the new laws, they have remained steadfast in demanding their repeal.

On Republic Day 2021, some 5,00,000 people went on a procession along earlier agreed designated routes as a symbolic expression that the day belongs to them as much as to anyone else. However, a few thousand were surprisingly able to take an unblocked route and ended up at the Red Fort in the centre of the city from where a Sikh religious flag was hoisted and some clashes took place between protestors and police.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi broke his silence to declare the Red Fort incidents an insult to the

country and insist that the reforms would proceed unabated. Hundreds were arrested, journalists reporting on the events were charged, and the authorities then moved to blockade the farmers' encampments with razor-sharp Concertina wire, steel spikes implanted in the ground as well as constructing concrete walls.

But when the Uttar Pradesh government threatened to evict farmers by midnight of 28 February, following a leadership appeal, thousands more flocked to the occupation sites, first in Uttar Pradesh and then from Punjab and Haryana.

At a critical point, just as the government was planning to go on a strong offensive, the farmers' struggle got a powerful second wind and the occupations and resistances continue to this day.

The Textile Strike and its Aftermath

How might we assess the farmer movement's chances of success? One way is to compare it to the last mobilisation of an equivalent scale: the Bombay textile workers' strike of 1982-83. Then, 2,24,000 of the city's mill workers went on strike, shutting down the industry with demands for increased wages, much better work conditions, and an end to restrictive labour laws that denied them the right to choose another more militant union led by Datta Samant in place of the only officially recognised pro-owners Congress-led union, the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh which had done little to nothing for them.



Bombay textile workers' strike of 1982-83

Over 58 million person-days were lost contrasted to the 29 million person-days lost by the great British Miners Strike of 1984-85. Despite their great numbers, however, objective circumstances were not in the workers' favour.

Directed against big and medium mill owners and indirectly against the state, many mill owners were looking to shift production to power looms outside the city, and could expect substantial compensation through land sales, while the Maharashtra government had its eyes on de-industrialising the city in favour of it becoming a commercial-financial centre.

Another spur to state intransigence was its awareness that any concession to the Samant union would spread militancy to workers in other industries.

For the national government, breaking the strike also fit into larger economic plans. India's neoliberal shift towards a more globally open economy, with greater privatisation of the public sector and a growing service sector, did not begin with the 1991 economic crisis, but during this period of the 1980s.

The struggle then was heroic but isolated, despite some public sympathy from ordinary citizens of Bombay. It lacked strong support from other sectors of the working class or cross-class support and was basically left on its own by the major trade union federations which feared possible membership desertions to Samant, should he triumph.

“India’s neoliberal shift, with greater privatisation of the public sector and a growing service sector, did not begin with the 1991 economic crisis, but during the 1980s. That is when the Textile Strikes took place in Mumbai, demanding increased wages, much better work conditions, and an end to restrictive labour laws.”

However strong, the strike was essentially a defensive reaction to terrible conditions rather than an expression of a rising class consciousness that might shift the relationship of forces between labour and capital.

Railway Strike

That shift would have taken place if the 1974 Railway Strike had been successful. That came at the crest of a wider more general wave of labour militancy. It was, till then, the greatest ever strike in the public sector involving 1.7 million or 70% of the total employed by the Railways. It was called off after 20 days (7-28 May) when thousands were arrested, many more suspended, and armed personnel called in to begin running the trains.



1974 Railway Strike

The Railway strike took place when a mass movement was launched by JP Narayan, who had declared that the youth are the catalyst for a “Total Revolution” against corruption, class, caste, and communal antagonisms. This agitation spread through urban North India. It was the first such anti-Congress mass movement since Independence, drawing together most opposition parties.

This agitation, along with the Railway Strike, were important spurs to Indira Gandhi’s declaration of Emergency in June 1975. The end of the Emergency and defeat of the Congress in the 1977 elections did not result in an upswing in working-class militancy, though social movements of various kinds arose.

Women's Movement and Others

These included the rise of an autonomous women's movement sparked by the gang rape in police custody of a tribal girl, Mathura, eventually leading to the formation of the Forum Against Rape in 1979, soon renamed the Forum Against Oppression of Women, and then the inauguration in 1980 of an all-India Network of Autonomous Women's Organisations.

In the same period, civil society groups like Nivara Haq Sangarsh Samiti (publicly endorsed by Bollywood star Shabana Azmi) and others emerged to mobilise slum and pavement dwellers to fight evictions and demolitions and for the rights of the homeless in Maharashtra, while student movements erupted in major central universities in Bombay [now Mumbai], Hyderabad, Delhi, West Bengal and elsewhere.

Civil liberties groups also sprang up in different provinces to defend human rights, whether violated by the state or others. These groups sought to network nationally in a new context where courts at all levels now sought to atone for their supine behaviour during the Emergency by entertaining Public Interest Litigations of all kinds.

The Struggle by Farmers

Turning to the farmers' struggle today, the numbers at various times have reached 5,00,000 or more, since there is large-scale back-and-forth movement between the occupation sites and villages every few days. The period of sustained blockage at the borders has now lasted for over four months and is continuing. In comparison to the Textile Strike, several significant differences are apparent.

The farmer agitation is directly against the Centre overriding state governments, and indirectly against the agri-corporates. With the Centre as the upfront opponent, it has had a far greater nationwide impact, attracting broader sympathy from across the country. After all, close to 50% of the population are either engaged directly in agriculture or backward-forward linkages or in providing goods and services that largely depend on farmer incomes.

Cross-occupational sympathy is much greater because of living links with the armed forces, police, lower-level government bureaucracies, and to urban low-level wage earners of various kinds from the self-employed to domestic workers. Its effect, unlike the Textile Strike, has been to put the Centre somewhat on the defensive.

The different composition of the farm movement is also striking. The action is led not by those who are separated from the means of production or whom we can call part of the classical working class, as in 1982-83, but by the peasant equivalent of what is sometimes called the petty bourgeoisie. This is not to say that the struggle is not progressive, which it certainly is.

From the 1970s and 80s, and even in the 90s, rich farmers led farmers' movements and were an important force behind certain regional political parties. But with the growing agrarian crisis, three developments seem to have taken place.

First, the power of regional parties has been eroded. Second, the mobilising capacity and leadership by this wealthier strata have to a significant extent given way to that exercised by small and medium-sized farmers organised in unions often led by left forces, particularly in Punjab. Third, greater migration and greater precarity of work among the lower and weaker sections of the landholding peasantry has made farmers acutely aware of the dangers of corporatisation, and the loss of public procurement, and the minimum support price.

Compared then to the textile strike, the chances of achieving success are certainly higher, though not at all certain. One major difference is that a great many textile workers had to return to their villages in their home states just to survive leaving a considerably smaller proportion to seek financial support and solidarity through demos, flash strikes, etc. from workers in other industrial and service sectors in Bombay and Maharashtra.

In the current struggle of farmers, the lines of communication, material replenishment, and numerical reinforcement when required between the rural backstop and the sites of occupation are much closer and stronger.

Can it, therefore, succeed on its own? Even success does not mean that Hindutva hegemony will have been seriously undermined, nor that it will sufficiently shift the general relationship of forces between capital and labour. For that, a much longer and wider collective struggle and the emergence of a national political alternative are required.

Certainly, if successful, it would halt for some considerable time the neoliberal corporate strides into Indian agriculture. Defeat, on the other hand, will accelerate the neoliberal push as well as further consolidate the ties between the BJP and capital.

The agricultural laws must naturally be opposed, and respect is due to the left leadership of the unions that have constituted the backbone of the struggle but which has its political and theoretical limitations.

Unlike industrial unions of individual workers, these are unions of farm owners aspiring to raise incomes within a capitalist framework, who on their own are unlikely to move in an eco-sensitive and larger-scale cooperative ownership direction. This is the only real way to overcome the agrarian crisis, that will remain even if these laws are repealed.

That is to say, repeal of these laws is a necessary but far from sufficient condition for a decisive improvement in Indian agriculture and the lives of those connected to this sector.

Where Are We Headed?

As the first big successful push against the Modi government, this struggle has undeniably encouraged other forms of ongoing opposition. Student and teacher bodies outside the Hindutva tent are similarly angered by the Centre's efforts to ideologically homogenise through personnel and curriculum changes the public higher education system.

Progressive civil society groups and NGOs are worried by the cumulative assault on democratic rights to curb even the mildest forms of public dissent while draconian laws are being used to frighten, harass, arrest and punish liberal and left activists.

Many non-BJP regional parties know they face a force out to eliminate or suborn them politically-electorally. There are then substantial sections of the populace that are wishing success to the farmers and are emboldened to support it for their aims and hopes.

But the strength of the current movement comes from the fact that it is (and seen to be) independent of the opposition parties. Moreover, what unites the plethora of representative farm unions in struggle is their common and specific focus on addressing the economic plight of farmers and farm-workers.

The baton for carrying out a broader multiple-issue platform of the struggle for the defence and pursuit of the democratic rights and needs of all sections of society must be handed over to the opposition parties. This responsibility these parties have so far comprehensively failed to fulfill. Frankly, it is doubtful if they have the capacity or even the moral-political inclination to do so.

Where a broader unity with farmers can be forged—indeed one potentially powerful enough to force the Modi government to fully concede—would be unity with the organised working class, itself greatly angered by the latest labour laws. These aim to ease hiring-firing, make unionisation and legal strikes extremely difficult, promote casualisation, and do much else in favour of employers.

That sections within the farmer bodies have now called not just for wider pan-Indian farmer unity but for Kisan-Mazdoor Ekta is an advance. But how to practically operationalise this to seriously erode the Centre's intransigence not to ever fully repeal the laws? Earlier hopes that at the very least the BJP-led coalition government of Haryana would fall because the JJP would withdraw support, have been belied. If despite such a prolonged resistance this has not happened so far, there is little reason to think it will happen further down the line even as the occupations carry on.

A serious overall defeat for the BJP in the five Assembly elections where polling is starting or soon to start would certainly boost the morale of the farmers and more generally that of other opponents of the Modi government. But this is unlikely. The final overall result is likely to be more mixed with gains for the BJP in some places to perhaps more than compensate for weaker performances elsewhere.

The key is not just continuing the occupation or having periodic demonstrations and marches or solidarity events but mass strike action! This hits directly at the authority of the government and hurts their big business backers the most, namely in their pockets.

The central trade union federations, barring of course the BJP-controlled BMS, have extended support to the farmers' struggle and carried out solidarity actions. But precisely because these federations are controlled by their respective political party masters, basic worker unity usually gets more fragmented than promoted.

Lessons for Others

Indeed, how the 40-plus farm unions and other bodies have worked together is an object lesson for the trade union federations. The new labour laws represent a death warrant for them, so that alone should be sufficient spur to such action. Here, ritual all-India one-day strikes, though helpful, are not the answer. What is needed are large-scale rolling strikes every few days across different industrial sectors and states. This way the economic burden on strikers is lessened since these actions are not continuous but spread out over time and among different sections, and occur in different places and regions.

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There is an opportunity today to forge with farmers the kind of unity in struggle that can inflict the most powerful blow yet to the Modi neoliberal project. One can only hope that it is taken.

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extended support to the farmers' struggle and carried out solidarity actions. But precisely because these federations are controlled by their respective political party masters, basic worker unity usually gets more fragmented than promoted."

Even if this opportunity is lost and the outcome is some compromise but not a total repeal of the laws, politically, things will not be the same. There will have been a more lasting breach in the popularity of the Modi regime. For that alone, this farmers' struggle deserves our deep admiration.

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P.S.

- The Leaflet. March 30, 2021:
<https://www.theleaflet.in/two-struggles-in-a-changing-india-bombay-mill-strikes-and-farmers-agitation-rights/#>
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