

New Front in West Bengal Agricultural Workers' Struggle Against Land Seizures

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While agricultural workers and peasants in the West Bengal community of Singur continue to defy state repression in their struggle against the planned eviction of 6,000 poor families from prime farmland to make way for an auto plant, a new struggle has been launched against the latest government farmland seizure.

The IUF-affiliated Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity (PBKMS) has been actively supporting the Singur struggle, which has taken on new impetus – despite growing state repression – since Rajkumar Bhul was killed by the police two months ago. A lawyers' group has successfully filed in the Supreme Court for orders against police atrocities committed on September 25. A public hearing with the participation of prominent intellectuals has roundly condemned both the police atrocities and the land seizures. The conflict with the West Bengal Left Front government's farmland expropriation program, writes the PBKMS, "has become the testing ground for new political alliances in West Bengal - between left and non-left parties, between trade unions, non-party organizations and political parties; between intellectuals and agricultural workers." Repression has not halted residents' massive resistance, despite government plans to take over the land after the next rice harvest. Armed police camps have been established in every village, farmers have been denied their seeds for the next crop, and irrigation wells have been taken out of commission.

PBKMS has now taken the lead in organizing resistance to the latest government land seizure, a project to construct a nuclear power plant on 5,000 acres of productive farmland in Joonput-Haripur to provide electricity to, among other consumers, the industrial facilities being established (on highly favorable terms to investors) on expropriated farmland. On November 16th, a technical team came to West Bengal to inspect seven possible nuclear power plant sites. PBKMS, after learning of their plans, organized a blockade at Joonput -Haripur, leading 5,000 residents to resist the officials' entry on November 17. Resistance continued on the 18th, despite a huge police presence. On the 19th, government officials continued their attempts to enter the area while the team of nuclear experts met the Chief Minister, who officially designated Joonput-Haripur the chosen site despite massive local opposition.

PBKMS members in Joonput-Haripur are resisting the land seizure for two reasons. First, the rich, multi cropped land is used to grow the rice, wheat, mustard, potatoes, betel leaf and chilies which support 25,000 people. It also includes a sea beach which supports some 20,000 fisherpeople. The buffer zone for a nuclear plant in India includes a 1.6 kilometre radius where no one is allowed to live. Only 10,000 people can live within a 5 kilometre radius, 20,000 within a 10 km radius and 100,000 within a 30 km radius – in this case all rich and densely-populated farmland.

Secondly, the residents of Haripur justifiably fear the potential effects of radioactive pollution on their health and their lives. Fisherfolk fear a drop in fish yields due to heating of the sea water which will be used to cool the reactor.

PBKMS was part of a successful state-wide campaign in 2000 to stop construction of a nuclear plant in the ecologically sensitive area of Sunderbans. It has been preparing its members in Joonput-

Haripur for the nuclear industry invasion for the past 5 months. Educational meetings with nuclear experts, street meetings and the distribution of leaflets against land acquisition and in support of the Singur struggle have been organized. PBKMS members were therefore well prepared for the visit by the nuclear establishment.

On November 20, PBKMS took the lead in forming the citizen's committee Parmanu Chulli Birodhi O Jeeban Jeevika Bachao Committee (Committee Against Nuclear Plant and For Life and Livelihood), which includes all political parties and trade unions. The West Bengal government is pushing nuclear power as part of its strategy of industrialization at all costs. Its nuclear enthusiasm is also connected to the recent Indo-US nuclear deal, which has been strongly resisted at the national level by the parties that form the West Bengal government. Despite national protests against the agreement, the Left Front in West Bengal appears to want to be the first to take advantage of an agreement which is crucial to salvaging the fortunes of the sagging US nuclear industry.

PBKMS has appealed for international support for the struggle in Joonput-Haripur, which is crucial to the livelihood of thousands of agricultural workers and poor farmers. You can send letters of protest to the Chief Minister of West Bengal calling on the state government to stop acquisition of prime farmland for non-agricultural uses and drop the nuclear construction in Joonput-Haripur. Local residents do not want to pursue nuclear power generation as the solution to India's energy needs.

Click in the field above to a message to the government of West Bengal.

http://www.iuf.org/cgi-bin/campaigns/show_campaign.cgi?c=234

You can send a similar message to Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmoham Singh through the government web site here.

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P.S.

* Posted to the IUF website on 30-Nov-2006. http://www.iufdocuments.org/cgi-bin/dbman/db.cgi?db=default&uid=default&ID=3901&view_records=1&ww=1&en=1