

Statement (India): Repeal the Farm Acts

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As winter cold descends hard on North India, the newly emerged 'trolley cities' along the length of National Highway 1 and 9 at the Singhu and Tikri borders respectively, are getting longer day by day. Carrying with them rations for months, these protests have emerged as a formidable reaction against the neoliberal march of the Khaki Brigade and government. With nearly two lakh people residing in these make-shift cities with working toilets, bathrooms, water heating geysers running on fire wood, kitchens, reading rooms, their own newspaper and libraries, these protests are said to be one of the largest ever protests, at least in the recent history of India. While these protesters are demanding the repealing of the three Farm Laws, the crowds present here are far from limited to just farmers---students, unemployed youth, teachers, artists and people from various sections of society are also part of these protests.

Contrary to the numbers at the national level, where 86 percent of farmers are small and marginal, in Punjab, the number of small and marginal farmers, who own less than 2 hectares, is about 33 percent. However, the numbers are relatively closer to the national average in Haryana---67 percent. These two states were at the heart of the Green Revolution and experienced a flourishing agricultural economy from the 1970s onwards. In the early 90s, the Centre started taking back its support to farmers in the form of subsidies while agricultural productivity started declining and input costs started increasing. This growing crisis was further exacerbated by the entry of multinational and corporate agri-businesses. These factors had a detrimental impact on the emerging capitalist farmers who owned less than 4 hectares. Increased costs for inputs and technology mired them in loan cycles, which culminated in a suicide wave that took the lives of nearly 20,000 farmers in the last two decades in Punjab alone. It is important to note that the number of farmer suicides in the country since 1995 is well over 300,000. If we add the number of landless working in the fields the figures will be much higher. This is a sign of a much deeper malaise and an all-engulfing crisis that has gripped the country since the implementation of neoliberal measures.

In the wake of the Green Revolution, a procurement regime was established, whose function was to procure the crops of wheat, rice and other food grains at the Minimum Support Price (MSP) set by the Centre. These food grains were made available to the poor at a negligible price through Fair Price Shops but under pressure from free-market forces, the universal Public Distribution System (PDS) was seriously weakened. The Essential Commodity Act (amendment), which is one of the three Farm Laws, is one more step towards dismantling the procurement regime and PDS. Under this Act, the hoarding of essential commodities that can be stored such as food grains, has become legal, enabling the manipulation of food prices for the benefit of big agri-corporations while the other two Laws aim to eradicate MSP, and to promote contract farming by big agri-businesses--- all of which will enable them to make huge profits while also leading to the massive polarisation of landholdings.

The basic line of confrontation and struggle can be put very simply---it is farmers control over their own lives and livelihood --- versus corporate control over the agricultural sector ushered in by this government!

These three Laws by aiming to greatly undermine the regime of procurement and distribution in the name of promoting market freedom are an attack not only on the peasantry but also on all working

people of India. Moreover, the Centre has put forward proposals for allowing corporates to set up their own banks, for privatising certain public sector utilities, and is pushing through Four Labour Codes whose purpose is precisely to casualise and contractualise and dismiss labour in the mining, manufacturing and services sectors by shifting more control and power to private business especially to big corporates. If the government succeeds in this current assault on farmers they will be much more strengthened in their subsequent attempt to go after urban and semi-urban workers. This is why the need, today and tomorrow, is to forge a strong and enduring worker-peasant unity!

To understand the present protests, we have to look beyond the agrarian crises into the current rural distress in the states of Punjab and Haryana. Unemployment in the state of Punjab is 33.6 percent and 35.7 percent in Haryana---higher than national levels. Furthermore, the de-peasantisation of small and marginal farmers in the last two decades has worsened the crisis. From the 1990s onwards, the rising costs of inputs and technology has made farming unviable for the small and marginal farmers and pushed a large section of them out of agriculture. Farmers who own from 2 hectares to 4 hectares barely make enough to pay for their costs, owing to the assured price in the form of MSP. In fact, it is precisely this combination of serious unemployment, de-peasantisation and unviability of cultivation for the majority of farmers that lies at the heart of this unrest.

What makes these protest different from other protests against the Modi regime is the dominant involvement of Left forces. A great many of these forces belong to the Marxist-Leninist tradition of the Indian Left. While this fact opens possibilities unseen in preceding protests, the ideological sectarianism of these forces also puts constraints on the potential of the present unrest.

The issue of securing a proper MSP for agricultural produce has garnered support of peasants from Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The Left should make all efforts to transform these protests into wider peoples struggles against the present authoritarian regime and to give it an anti-capitalist disposition. To broaden and deepen these protests, efforts should be made to include the demands of various sections of working people. Incorporation of demands for employment generation and food security can reinforce the appeal and strength of this movement among the masses across different regions. Pursuing these demands would not only help the movement to gain support among the working people, but it will also push the representatives of the sections of the rich peasantry to the margins. There is an urgent need to build solidarities with the working-class struggles going elsewhere.

Left populism may not be the end objective of Left politics, but it can be an ushering of anti-capitalist politics. Around the world, the Left has seen the resurrection in one or other form of Left populism—US, Britain, Spain and Greece are some of the examples. Many of these experiments have faced defeats, but one thing is certain---that they have succeeded in gaining the support of working-class people and could be used as a springboard for furthering working-class politics. The present movement, with the involvement of Left forces, has the potential to be used as the departure point for such class politics. The left needs to recognize this possibility and work together towards this goal.

The biggest limitation the dominant Left forces have is their sectarian attitude towards electoral politics. For them, electoral politics is the point which differentiates the 'revolutionary' M-L forces from the 'revisionist' mainstream Left parties. However, there is an urgent need to give this rising ferment an electoral form to not only counter the forces of Hindutva but also to mobilize the masses behind the anti-neoliberal agendas. On the other hand, the role played by the mainstream Left parties to support and strengthen present unrest is insufficient. Even in the states and districts where they have a significant presence, much more mobilization around the issue of repealing the Farm Laws is required.

This is not a peasant uprising to capture state power, as professed by Maoist organisations, nor is this a movement of only rich peasants as claimed by the adherents of a stage-ist Socialist Revolution. This is a movement where the majority of people are fighting for their immediate and longer term survival. The Left should not squander this opportunity to form a redoubtable opposition to Hindutva and to come out of their time-worn ideological cocoons.

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P.S.

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