

Radical Socialist Statement on Indian Farmers' Struggle: A Second Wind!

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Radical Socialist salutes the courage and commitment of the overwhelming majority of farmers who have just renewed the momentum of their remarkable months long struggle after the unanticipated events at Red Fort on Republic Day. Whatever the initial motivations of the farmers involved at the Red Fort, the government was keen to use the occasion as a means to forcibly evict and more generally delegitimise the farmers' long struggle. We welcome the fact that the courage of farmers from Western UP, Haryana and Punjab has served to demonstrate the power of solidarity and organisation in the face of a brutal state. At the same time, the role of Deep Sidhu and the way the police treated him, suggest that there may indeed have been a 'false flag' component. But the lumping of the KMSC with him is erroneous.

Consider the following:

- (i) Around 5 lakhs of farmers of various groups/unions marched in Delhi along designated routes but with minimal media coverage while internet connections there were repeatedly disrupted. However, one group (KMSC) which had already before January 26th made its intention not to respect the assigned routes or starting time, made its way to its own target. Another group following Deep Sidhu (with a pro-BJP political history) and Lakha Sidhana (with a serious criminal record) were able to go to the Red Fort where a Sikh religious flag was hoisted on a smaller flagpole, though the main pole with the Indian tricolor remained in position. Although in comparison to the 5 lakh farmers procession, the total number of these 'breakaways' was around 5000 at its peak, it was the Red Fort event that hogged the media coverage while government spokespersons and their TV anchor drumbeaters all went berserk, screaming about the supposed insult to the Indian flag on Republic Day.
- (ii) This served as the excuse over the next two days to decry and condemn the whole of farmers' movement for 'going out of hand', for their 'insult to the nation', for having 'moral responsibility' for acts of vandalism and clashes with the police trying to 'restrain' them even as all the leaders of the farm unions taking the designated route, when learning of what had happened, took their distance from the events at ITO and Red Fort.
- (iii) Using this manufactured 'public outcry', two days late on January 28th, the Centre sent police and large paramilitary contingents to the Singhu and Tikri borders between Haryana and Delhi, while the UP Adityanath government called for immediate eviction by midnight of those encamped at the Ghazipur border. Armed UP police were also sent to Ghazipur and District authorities cut off power and water supply to the farmers there.
- (iv) Meanwhile at Singhu and Tikri a group of supposedly local residents of around 200 people each, suddenly collected on the same day demanding eviction of the farmers there; encroaching into the farmers area even as the police and other forces on standby were seemingly incapable of preventing

this and the subsequent stone pelting and fighting started by these 'local' residents. Revealingly, their main and constant outcry and sloganising was not about the inconvenience caused to them but that the farmers---as shown by the Red Fort events---had insulted the flag and the nation, which was exactly the line of indictment assiduously pursued by the BJP and Centre.

(v) Charges were levelled against the leaders of the entire farmers' agitation under, sedition and UAPA provisions, including those heading major unions at Tikri (Joginder Singh Ugraha), at Singhu (Darshanpal Singh), and at Ghazipur (Rakesh Tikait). Charges under sedition laws and UAPA means there can be arrests for prolonged periods without bail. Clearly, the government had planned systematically to make an assault on various fronts with the aims of defaming the farmers movement, reversing their momentum, preparing grounds for arrest of leaders, curbing dissenting voices deemed important both within and outside the movement itself, frightening people and groups giving solidarity in different ways, shifting public opinion as much as possible to its side, reinforcing the 'strong man' image of Modi out to build a 'newer and stronger' India.

Instead, the determination of Tikait to continue the border siege at Ghazipur, no matter what the costs in terms of possible arrest or physical deterioration, along with public declaration of this intent proved to be another spark that led to massive support from farmers and the wider public in UP. The resulting en masse rush of thousands to come in tractors, by bus or on foot to the Ghazipur site thereby swelling the ranks to beyond any earlier peak. Reinforcement also came from Haryana and Punjab while re-found enthusiasm has led to many more trooping to the encampments at Singhu and Tikri. The police and paramilitary forces at Ghazipur had to abandon their eviction plans while power and water connection were restored due in part no doubt to the negative political fallout for the BJP in UP. In short, the farmers' struggles have got a second wind and will continue.

Again, the coverage of events of Republic Day by certain journalists and a few prominent persons on twitter and social media, because they were mildly or implicitly critical of the government's handling of the January 26th events of its subsequent messaging, became the excuse for issuing FIRs charging them under draconian laws for criminal behaviour.

This is not to deny that matters are still delicately poised and in balance. The prospect of a severe setback has been overturned but the battle ahead is still going to be a hard one. It is critical that the initiative of the mass of this movement continues to be expressed by its leaders and that the remarkable flourishing of argument, strategic discussion and development of political consciousness that is currently happening in the encampments is deepened and extended to those who continue to stream into the movement. The farmers are showing a level of determination that might yet lead to success in repealing these laws. How broad this success will be and how quickly it could be won also depend on the actions of other Left and democratic forces. Four of these are critical:

1. Farmers' groups in other parts of the country are slowly joining in the agitation in the more militant and sustained mode demonstrated by this movement. Their participation, including in places like MP, Chhattisgarh and Orissa where the existing marketing system is an important lifeline for farmers, as well as in places like Maharashtra, Bihar, Bengal and in the South where its importance might be currently diminished. Left groups active among farmers in these places should seek out creative and locally relevant ways to enter into sustained agitations.
2. The most important constituency we look to beyond farmers must surely be the working classes. The intelligence and courage of the farmers in the course of a prolonged substantial battle over issues is an example the Trades Unions must follow. No more ceremonial one day strikes. This is the time to prepare and launch a staggered wave of strikes across industrial and service sectors over the labour codes.
3. The farmers have also placed concern about the PDS on the negotiating agenda. This is a

lifeline to the broad masses across the country and many social movements have been active in securing and enhancing these entitlements. A sustained push is possible in this moment towards securing and enhancing the welfare support the Indian state provides.

4. Finally, the opposition parties, for their narrow political reasons, have been riding piggy back on this struggle by expressing verbal solidarity but what else seriously have they done? It is not for them to try and capture control or establish dominant influence on the movement which in fact they cannot. This has denied the Modi government any real credibility when it dishonestly claims that Congress, AAP or other parties are the behind-the-scenes manipulators of this great agitation. But it is time now for these opposition parties to separately---individually or, better still, collectively---mobilise their members, activists and supporters to carry out sustained protests and demonstrations against the Centre and against BJP-ruled state governments everywhere. This should not just be against the farm laws. Broadening the struggle requires coming out for freeing political prisoners; against the nefarious aspects of the new labour codes; against the centralising anti-federalist and anti-democratic measures and practices of the Sangh whether in governing institutions or in the broader society, be these the CAA, 'love jihad', the draconian laws themselves, as well as the attempts to legally harass, arrest and otherwise punish those critical of Hindutva and this government.

The fact that the UP government's attack led to Tikait's emotional appeal, followed by massive support from peasants in western UP, should not blind us to one complexity. It has already been remarked upon by many that Khap Panchayats have moved against the BJP. More sophisticated BJP supporters have attempted to use this contradiction to attack leftists for their alleged hypocrisy. This is a contradictory reality. It is indeed true that khaps were used by the BJP in the period of its ascent in UP. The potential for khaps to turn in reactionary ways does exist. Yet, by calling for greater mobilizations, for mass struggles in which Hindus and Muslims, people of various castes, are compelled to fight together, these khap panchayats also push their members in a different direction. The task of a really activist left has to be to strive to push these forces in as far a progressive direction as possible, while being aware that defence of Muslims and Dalits may bring them into conflict with these bodies. The task is to try and see that participation in progressive struggles weakens reactionary currents.

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