

India: Beyond Nodeep Kaur's arrest: Why workers are supporting the farmer protests

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They fear the laws could shrink employment and raise prices.

For 32-year-old Goldie, a tailor from Sri Muktsar Sahib district in Punjab, the slogan 'Kisan Mazdoor Ekta' – farmer-worker unity – rings true. "No one asks me if I am a Dalit," he said. "Everyone eats together. It is a milestone for us."

Goldie has been camping in Tikri village on the Delhi-Haryana border since November. It is one of the three sites on the doorstep of India's capital where thousands of farmers have been protesting against the Modi government's three farm laws, which they fear they will open the doors to corporate dominance of the agricultural sector and undermine their livelihoods.

Although Goldie is not a farmer, he decided to join the protests since he believes the laws will adversely impact the entire working-class, not just farmers. The protest movement, in fact, seems to have built wider solidarities between a section of workers and farmers, who are otherwise often locked in economic conflict over agricultural wages.

The solidarities have drawn more attention after a young labour activist, [Nodeep Kaur](#), was arrested for mobilising workers near the Singhu farm protest site. In early January, Kaur and her colleagues from the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan staged a demonstration in the Kundli industrial area, near Singhu, outside a factory that had not paid wages to its workers. The police arrested her on charges of extortion and attempt to murder.

Nodeep Kaur, 23, hails from the same district as Goldie. Born in a family of agricultural workers, she joined the farmers' protests in November to express solidarity with them, said her sister Rajveer Kaur, a PhD student at Delhi University. On December 1, on the sangathan's call, 2,000 workers boycotted a day's work and "marched for the farmers and decided to raise questions over their wage payment," she added.

Nodeep Kaur has now spent over a month in jail with her colleague Shiv Kumar, who was arrested on the same day. Their arrest, however, has not deterred other workers from continuing to show up in support of the farmers' protest.

Many say they have joined the movement because they fear the changes in farm laws would have a cascading impact – employment opportunities would shrink, prices would rise. Those who work on daily wages add that it is difficult for them to leave work and sit continuously at the protest sites, but they visit whenever they can since the farmer movement has encouraged them to mobilise and raise their concerns as well.

Employment at mandis

A point of convergence for farmers and workers was the concern over the dismantling of agricultural

mandis or market yards.

Farmers fear that one of the contentious laws, the Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, which allows the setting of private markets, could dismantle the existing Agricultural Produce Market Committees or mandis that serve as distribution centres for farmers where a minimum support price is guaranteed.

This concern resonated with workers who found employment at these yards during the harvest season.

Joginder Singh is a 52-year-old agricultural worker who earns the bulk of his income from working at the mandi in his native Dhand village in Haryana's Kaithal district. During the harvest season, he works as a palledar, lifting sack-loads of the produce onto trucks. Additionally, he does packaging work, earning Rs 5 for every bundle or sack.

Most of the mandi work, which stretches for nearly 18 hours in a day, is completed within 20 days, earning him around Rs 17,000. Working at the mandi was more profitable for him than working as a farm labourer earning a meagre Rs 350 per day for a few days of work, he said. "We feel happy when we get work at the mandi." There are at least 700 workers like him who depend on the mandi in Dhand, he said.

With the implementation of the farm laws, Singh fears that the mandi system could collapse, leading to a loss of employment for workers like him. "We will stop getting work after three to four years at the mandi and we will not be able to make the money we make there," he said.

Another worker had similar concerns. Forty-year-old Jaswant Kheri of Kheri Khurd village in Punjab's Sangrur district said he works as a palledar for arhathiyas or traders, who act as middlemen, during the harvest season.

The loading work earns him between Rs 15,000 and Rs 20,000 in a month, far higher than the Rs 300-wage he gets for labouring in the fields and spraying pesticide on crops. When agricultural work dries out, he travels 40 km to Barnala to look for construction work. But finding work in the city was tough, he said.

"There is a lot of fear that the mandis will shut," he said. "We have no land or means to earn otherwise. The other thing is that we will not be able to afford things in the market."

The workers who function as palledars in the mandis are mostly Dalits, said Gurumukh Singh of the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee that mobilises Dalit farmers and agricultural workers for expanding their access to common reserved land. "Dalits get regular work in palledari in mandis and the laws are harmful for them," he said.

Another worker, Karmjit Singh, spends around 18 hours a day while she works at the mandi in Bhunsla village in Kaithal. She cleans and sifts through grain to earn Rs 500 a day.

This, she said, was better than finding work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act or MGNREGA that pays her Rs 309 for a day's work. "We have to protest, then only we get 80 days of work under the scheme," said Karmjit Singh, 35.

She fears the farm laws might end the mandi system and impoverish her family further. "It will be a burden on us," she said. "We will lose so much employment."

Karmjit Singh is also concerned about the amendments made to the Essential Commodities Act, that

exempt cereals, pulses, oilseeds, potatoes, onions, edible oils from stockpiling restrictions, which some fear could lead to hoarding by companies and price inflation. "Where will we get rations from if the government removes the stock limit," she asked.

While she has joined local demonstrations in Kaithal to register her opposition to the farm laws, Karmjit Singh rues the fact that she has not been able to travel to the Delhi border protest sites. "I cannot afford the transport, it will cost me more than Rs 500 to travel and come back," she said.

'Children of farmers'

The farmer protests have also attracted support from industrial workers. These workers from industries like automobile manufacturing, plastics and iron welding, may not sit regularly at the protest sites but their support comes from organising rallies and awareness drives at a local level, said Ram Niwas, a trade unionist in Manesar, Haryana's auto sector hub.

Even workers at the vendor companies for Maruti had approached trade unions and offered Rs 100 from their salaries every month to support protesting farmers, he said. At least 30,000 employees who form the Maruti Suzuki Mazdoor Sangh wore black bands at their work place to condemn the three farm laws, and on January 26, they took out a 26 km-long march in the industrial belt, he added.

Explaining why industrial workers want to support the protesting farmers, Niwas said: "These workers are linked to farmers in some way or the other. Most of these workers are children of farmers. Either they have less land because of which they joined the industry...they understand [the implications of the farm laws]."

Rajesh Kumar, general secretary of Indian Federation of Trade Unions, cited similar reasons. "Most of the workers [in Delhi] are migrants from different states. What they earn in Delhi, they invest that in their small farms back home."

Among such workers from farming families was 33-year old Pawan Samain, who works in the Maruti-Suzuki factory in Manesar, Haryana. His brother Sajjan Kumar farms on three acres in Fatehabad district. To offer his support, Samain regularly takes other workers to the Tikri protest site and carries kilos of wheat and other rations for the community kitchen. "We know that this [farm laws] will push us to a loss," he said.

Moreover, there was fear among workers about the inflationary impact of the laws, in particular the amendments made to the Essential Commodities Act.

"Things will become expensive for us," said Ranvir Kumar, a 34-year-old who works in an iron welding factory in Mayapuri, West Delhi, who hails from Munger district in Bihar and earns around Rs 14,000 per month. "Rich people will not be affected. But workers like us will suffer. Already there are many products that common workers cannot buy."

Some industrial workers also want to use the momentum of the farmer protests to raise awareness about the Modi government's changes to the labour laws in 2020. The Centre replaced 44 existing labour laws with four labour codes which workers fear will water down labour rights, social security and other protections for those in the informal sector. "These laws are against workers and should be revoked," said Niwas.

'Cheap labour'

Not everyone, though, shares this enthusiasm.

Goldie, the tailor who was protesting at Tikri, has grown up in a family of agricultural labourers. His parents, despite their old age, still work in the fields for a daily wage of Rs 250. A disability kept Goldie away from farm work. He found employment in a tailoring shop for Rs 10,000.

He said his parents were initially sceptical of joining the protests against the farm laws. "They were under the impression that if the private sector comes then they will get more employment," he recalled. And if farmers grew weak and lost their land, perhaps they would be able to buy some cheaply, they wondered.

But Goldie pushed back against this. "Will they [corporates] pay us enough to buy food for the whole family?" he asked his parents. "The corporates will pay less because they want cheap labour. They will snatch everything, including our schools and hospitals."

Surender Singh, a leader of the Inqalabi Mazdoor Union which works with agricultural and industrial workers in Punjab, said many workers were confused about the impact of the laws. "We know what will happen to farmers but workers do not have much clarity yet on what will happen to them after these laws are implemented," he said.

On his part, he said he was trying to raise awareness on what he feared could happen: the dominance of private corporations in agriculture could give rise to exploitative labour practices. "India is a market for cheap labour and if workers do not understand this, then this [exploitation] will increase," he said.

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