

Modi Blinks, but Indian Farmers Stand Firm, Want All Demands Met

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After an entire year of demonizing, disparaging and denigrating the year-long farmers' struggle, the largest non-violent mass movement in world history, Modi finally blinked on November 19 and announced the government would repeal the three 'black' pro-corporate farm laws in the forthcoming winter session of the Indian Parliament. It is useful to recall that these laws were passed by Parliament without any consultation or debate in September last year.

This was a rare admission of failure on the part of Modi who is more prone to boasting about his prowess and achievements. In his speech that promised repeal, he characteristically offered no admission that there was any shortcoming on the part of the laws themselves or the procedures by which they were passed. According to him, the laws were great but his government despite all attempts was unable to convince a 'section' of the farmers about their benefit. Modi urged the protestors to disperse and go back to their farms and villages now that he had magnanimously agreed to repeal the laws.

Except for the lapdog mainstream Indian media that leaves no stone unturned to lavish praise on Modi, few, least among them the farmers, were taken in by Modi's dissembling. The umbrella body leading the farmers protest, SKM (Samyukta Kisan Morcha or United Farmers Front), while welcoming the repeal of the black laws, sternly reminded the government in an open letter to Modi that the protest would continue until their other demands besides the repeal of the laws were met. The most important of these are a legal guarantee by government of a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for all farm crops based on the Swaminathan Commission recommendation of C2 (cost of all inputs) +50%, withdrawal of the draft electricity amendment bill of 2020/2021, the withdrawal of all cases mounted against protesting farmers and the removal of penal provisions for stubble burning by farmers that is alleged to cause air pollution in the national capital. In addition, SKM demanded the removal of Union Minister Ajay Mishra from the government and his arrest on the charge of being the perpetrator of the horrific Lakhimpur Kheri incident where four protesting farmers and a journalist were mowed down and killed by an SUV driven by Mishra's son. SKM also noted in its letter that despite several rounds of talks between the representatives of the government and the farmers to resolve the issue, Modi chose to take "the path of a unilateral declaration rather than a bilateral solution."

Many observers have noted that Modi's decision to give in to the demand for repeal was prompted by the need to remove a festering sore in the BJP's near-term electoral prospects: the BJP's defeat in recent bypoll elections and the fast-approaching state elections in UP, Punjab and Rajasthan. It needs to be recalled that it was western UP, currently the site of some of the most intense farmer protests, that was responsible for the momentum that led to Modi's initial national victory in 2014 after the BJP successfully engineered communal polarization and riots between the Hindu Jat and Muslim farming communities in the area in late 2013. The farmers' movement has changed this scenario quite substantially in the last year. The agitation has brought the two communities together

again as was witnessed in massive gatherings in September this year and BJP leaders who caused religious divisions and promoted religious hatred are no longer welcome in many villages in western UP.

Despite Modi's honeyed appeal to the farmers to give up their agitation, the farmers have not forgotten that Modi's regime and his trusted apparatchiks consistently smeared the protestors with all sorts of defamatory labels like Maoists, urban Naxals, Khalistanis, pro-Pakistan agents, and anti-national terrorists. Violence was frequently deployed against assemblies of farmers through the use of tear gas, water cannons, and lathi charges by the police. A commentator wrote that to prevent the farmers from entering the capital "The most modern machinery was employed to build the most medieval defenses around Delhi — iron spikes grouted into highways, sections of roads gouged out by earth-movers, cement barricading erected in serried layers, the nation's capital was rendered off limits to those who keep this nation fed." This was evident on Republic Day last January, when all kinds of means were employed to keep farmers from entering the national capital as if they were part of some foreign invading army. Not content with this, agent provocateurs were inserted in their midst to carry out actions that would give the farmers a bad name.

Modi's derogatory epithet of "andolanjeevis" (literally those who make a living off protests) has not been forgotten by the farmers either. Over 700 farmers have died over the last year of the non-violent protests in various ways: exposure to harsh weather, police violence, disease, traffic accidents, and, regrettably, some suicides. Modi made seven international trips travelling thousands of miles to various parts of the globe. Did he find the time to travel seven or eight miles to the Delhi border with UP or Haryana to one of the farmers' encampments to take a look at how they were faring or even chat a bit with them? No, that was clearly not part of his agenda. It is no wonder that farmers have little trust in his word.

There is little doubt that the Modi regime is the most pro-corporate government in independent India's history. The pressure of agribusiness to insert itself into the farm sector as the repealed laws tried to do will re-assert itself. Already, some BJP followers and assorted "free-market" business-oriented economists are speculating on how these laws could be brought back in another guise.

The crisis in the farm sector is real both on economic grounds as shown by declining farmer incomes as well as on environmental grounds exacerbated by the climate change crisis. An accompanying article by our colleague Dr Balsher Sidhu originally published in The Wire explains the dimensions of this crisis and indicates the need for genuine solutions.

Meanwhile, the farmers are in a mood to celebrate their partial victory and reaffirm their resolve to fight for their remaining demands. On Friday November 26, farmers from the northern states came to Delhi's borders in a huge show of strength. A report in the Telegraph newspaper of November 27 stated:

"On loudspeakers, farmer leaders and activists could be heard asking people not to slacken. Near the center-stage, a group of farmers celebrated the farm law protest anniversary by donating blood. Sukhdev Bhullar, 42, from Anantpur Sahib said farmers had nourished the protest with their blood. "My blood is a tribute to all of them," he said.

"Celebrate the win but do not get carried away by it. We won't move an inch until all our demands have been met," farmer leader Shiv Kumar Kakka said, iterating the demand for an MSP law and compensation for the families of the dead."

As we go to publication, the SKM is debating the next steps needed to consolidate the protests and ensure they emerge victorious with their demands accepted. It is also encouraging that farmers have

joined hands with industrial workers who are trying to reverse changes to long-standing labor laws passed by the Modi regime and some BJP state governments in the midst of the pandemic.

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