

All India Protest: Indications of Emerging Transformative Worker-Farmer Alliance

Sindhu Menon



Photo Courtesy: CITU

The Line of Control (LoC), “The Zero Point”—this was what the borders of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh turned out to be for the hapless farmers, who wanted to reach Delhi on 26 November 2020 and support the All India General Strike of the trade unions in conjunction with their ‘Dilli Chalo’ agenda to air their concerns.

The police blocked the Tikri crossing (one of the entry points to Delhi) with huge cement blocks, barricades and barbed wire. As if that were inadequate, they parked trucks, trailers and small commercial vehicles as a further deterrent. The Delhi police used water cannons and tear gas on the protesting farmers. Permission to enter Delhi was denied to them initially, and when they were ultimately granted permission, they were asked to change their venue of protest from Jantar Mantar to Nirankari ground in Burari, north west of Delhi. Although the farmers welcomed the permission to enter Delhi, they did not accept the change in venue.

The Union Minister for Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare sent word that he would meet the leaders of the protest on 3 December 2020. Meanwhile, the Union Minister for Home Affairs, Amit Shah, requested the farmers to move to Burari; if they did so, they were informed that the government would meet the farmer leaders the very next day

Whereas the farmers are seeking the repealing of three agrarian Acts—The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers’ (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, The Essential Commodities

(Amendment) Act, on 26 November, India also witnessed one of the largest protests ever by the Indian working class.

The umbrage of the Indian working class reverberated through the nation as millions joined hands for a one-day strike across the country, to protest the fettering policies and initiatives of the ruling government against the Indian working class.

Opposing the central government's policies on labour codes and farm laws, the Platform of Central Trade Union Organisations, comprising INTUC, AITUC, HMS, CITU, AIUTUC, TUCC, SEWA, AICCTU, LPF, UTUC and independent Federations/Associations came together in protest, bringing work life in many states to a standstill. According to the Platform of Central Trade Union Organisations, more than 25 crore workers, participated in the strike.

Crores Strike Work

With an estimated 25 crore workers joining the strike, it became notable as one of the most massive general strikes under the joint coordination of all trade unions. The strike becomes more historic, when the two different entities—farmers and trade unions—joined to protest and raise their voice against the draconian violation of their rights.

There was a bandh-like situation in several states, including Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, with transport coming to a standstill, and factories, shops, offices and commercial establishments wearing a deserted look.

Industrial clusters in Karnataka, Telangana, Punjab, Maharashtra, Delhi, etc., witnessed a total strike. Port and dock workers of Kolkata, Chennai, Tuticorin, Cochin, JNPT, Vizag and Paradip struck work. Permanent workers as well as contract workers in coal, steel and iron ore mines too joined the strike. Federations of railway and defence employees too joined the protest.

The All India Banks Employees' Association (AIBEA), All India Bank Officers Association (AIBOA) and Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI) protested the government's 'anti-labour policies' and privatisation, jeopardizing banking operations in the country. Along with a seven-point charter of demands, bank employees also raised their opposition to the privatization of banks, outsourcing, and the contract system, and demanded stern action against big corporate defaulters.

According to a press release issued by All India Road Transport Workers' Federation, more than 3.5 crore transport workers—auto rickshaw, taxi, private bus, state transport undertaking bus services—participated in the strike. Truck operators in several states stopped their vehicles and expressed solidarity. "The success of the strike is a reflection of the anger of the working class and the peasantry against the anti-worker, anti-people and anti-national policies of the Modi-led NDA government," declared a press release. Along with their seven-point charter of demands, the unions demanded that the draconian M.V. Act Amendment 2019 be withdrawn. Failing to do so, would lead to further intensification of this struggle in the days to come.

Defying police restrictions, scheme workers, electricity employees, domestic workers, construction workers, *bedi* workers, hawkers, vendors, agricultural workers and self-

employed workers held demonstrations at various places. Human chains were formed in Mumbai and various districts in Maharashtra in solidarity.

The strike received very good response in Bengaluru. “Domestic workers from our union responded to the joint call of the central trade unions. Hundreds of workers participated in a joint meeting held in Freedom park and raised concerns,” says Geeta Menon, Secretary, Domestic Workers’ Rights Union. “Till date, the deliberations we made for a decent life for domestic workers fell on deaf ears. We sincerely hope that the demands proposed by this joint platform of trade unions will, at least, get addressed,” she adds.



Photo Courtesy: Geeta Menon, DWRU

The strike was near total in Bengaluru-based public sector undertakings (PSUs) and also, to a great extent in the PSUs in the Hyderabad region. Indian seamen, not only in India, but also those who were on duty in different parts of the world held solidarity actions from wherever they were located.

The call for the general strike was unanimously given on 2 October 2020 by central trade unions and independent federations in an online National Convention of Workers. As per the union’s estimate, around 25 crore people participated in the strike, employing various modes of protests. The right-wing union, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), however, opted out of the strike.

Strikes Cannot be Rituals– BMS

Talking to *Labour File*, the general secretary of BMS, Binoy Kumar Sinha, said that they participate in agitations that are confined only to labour issues. The strike on the 26th was not one such, according to BMS, because farmers, student unions and many others joined hands. “Other union’s protest for getting political mileage because they are part and parcel of political parties; we do not have a political agenda. We do agitate against the anti-labour moves of the government; we negotiate with them. What other unions do is to boycott the government.”

Criticising the strike, Sinha said, “Unfortunately, for our trade union friends, a general strike has become a yearly festival, which they observe as an annual ritual. We consider strike as the last resort and our strikes never fail.”

Deliberating on the new labour legislations, Sinha said that they welcome the Code on Wages and Social Security because it serves three purposes of labour laws—industrial progress, labour welfare and industrial peace. BMS considers the Code on Industrial Relations and Code on OSH as highly detrimental not only to workers but also one which will stall industrial progress and make the labour sector an area of constant conflict. “Our main objection is that these laws create lawless areas and chaos in nearly 80 per cent of the Industrial sector.”

Why this Working-Class Outrage?

The uproar began when the Centre decided to amalgamate the existing 44 complex labour laws into four labour codes, not taking into account the comments, concerns and opposition of the working class or its impact on them. Many joint demonstrations held during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, as well as the all-India strike on 8 January 2019, stand testimony to this fact.

“The success of this strike shows how distressed and disappointed the working class of India is. The workers are becoming more aware of the onslaught of the ruling government; its obsession to take away the rights of the working class, leaving them at the mercy of corporate giants; its malicious move to sell PSUs; its decision to hand over, even the defence industry, to private players; and besides all these, the government’s unsympathetic attitude of not heeding to the requests of the unions to give at least 10 kg of free ration per month to the needy. All this has brought them together—in a mammoth way, to raise their voices against the atrocities they face,” says Amarjeet Kaur, General Secretary of AITUC. According to her, the challenges are very big, the working class will have to fight it out unitedly. “If not, in due course, the word ‘worker’ or ‘labourer’ will vanish from dictionaries because no definition can be set for them.”

Saluting the toiling masses on the warpath and congratulating them for the successful strike, Comrade Tapan Sen, General Secretary of CITU, said: “The massive participation of the working class in this strike reflects the abhorrence and contempt they have for the bigoted labour policies of the central government. We consider this a successful strike because it has given more confidence to the trade union movement. It is successful because the working class now understand the path they need to take—that of resistance, defiance and non-cooperation.”

“This is one of the biggest strikes India has ever witnessed. We are forced to launch many such strikes in future too if the anti-labour attitude of the government does not change. The government has ventured to introduce 12 hours of work, violating the norms of the First Convention of ILO—C001, Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919,” says R. Chandrasekhar, Kerala State President, INTUC, and governing board member of International Labour Organisation. According to him, in the name of ‘ease of doing business’, the present government is silently paving the path for corporates and multi-national companies to loot the properties of this country. It has deviated from all its propagated promises in its election manifesto, to suit those with capital in an attempt to make them omnipotent, against the wishes and aspirations of the people of India and the working force in particular,” he adds.

A press release issued by Prasanta N. Chowdhury, Convener, National Coordination Committee of Electricity Employees & Engineers (NCCOEEE), comprising trade unions as well as organisations of engineers of the electricity industry, stated that 80 per cent of its 2.5 million workforce took part in the strike. Protest demonstrations were organised in more than 12,500 spots in cities, towns, villages, power plants and sub-stations in 615 districts out of 680 districts of the country. NCCOEEE will continue, through such struggles, to protect the public sector character of the electricity industry and the interests of electricity consumers as well people of the country.



Photo Courtesy: CITU

While condemning the arrests of various workers across the country, including 700 construction workers and peasant leaders, Comrade Tapan Sen warned the BJP government that it cannot suppress workers through vindictive action or arrests. “Workers and peasants will not rest till the disastrous and disruptive policies of the BJP government are reversed. This strike is only a beginning. Much more intense struggles will follow,” he said

Addendum

In a press release issued on 1 December 2020, the Platform of Central Trade Union Organisations and independent

Federations/Associations hailed the decision of All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (United Platform Indian Farmers’ Organisations) and the joint committee of Punjab *kisans* to stand firm on their demands and continue their united struggle. Lakhs of farmers are staging stay-in protests, having travelled in their tractors and trolleys to the four borders of Delhi; they have rejected the government’s offer outright to go to Burari as a precondition for talks.

The Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions and independent Federations/Associations have called on their affiliates throughout the country, to demonstrate their solidarity with the cause for which farmers are peacefully agitating till their demands are met.

Meanwhile, government has called the leaders for a meeting in Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi, today (1 December). However, the three-hour meeting with the Union Minister for Agriculture and Farmer Affairs, Narendra Singh Tomar, the Union Minister for Railways, and Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal, and Minister of State for Commerce, Som Parkash, was inconclusive. The farmers rejected outright the government suggestion of setting up a committee to look into the issues. The second round of meetings will take place on 3 December.