

'Farmers' Protest Needs A Logical Conclusion, We Cannot Just Retreat'| Darshan ...

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The farmers' struggle at the Delhi borders completed six months yesterday, the 26th of May. The day was observed as a Black Day (<https://sabrangindia.in/article/farmers-mark-six-months-agitation-against-centre>) all over the country, at the call of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM).

Braving unprecedented cold, followed by rains and storm, the struggle has now moved into the cruelest part of Delhi's summer. In the process, it has lost 470 of its people, thanks to the obstinacy of the government (<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/bku-rajewal-warns-of-black-flag-protest-on-may-26-against-centre-for-not-resuming-talks-7326116/>). If one dates the beginning of the struggle from June, when it began in Punjab, soon after the farm laws were stealthily, under cover of the pandemic, promulgated as ordinances by the Central government, the struggle has been on for ten months now. In other words, it is incorrect to go on referring to it as a protest – which we routinely do for many lost causes – for it is now a 'do or die' struggle. It became so from the time it shifted its venue to lay siege to Delhi.

Periodically, the government, its police and its minions in the media try and zero in on this epic struggle of the farmers for its ignoring, if not violating of Covid19 protocols. All this even as they look the other way while lakhs of people are thrown into the jaws of death, brought about by the mass murderers who have pushed populations in four states into prolonged election campaigns, played cynical games with precious oxygen and vaccine supplies and allowed all kinds of mass religious gatherings of the Hindus to take place in complete disregard of any protocol whatsoever.

It is important therefore to remember, as Dr Darshan Pal, one of the leaders of the SKM, asserted recently, in the following interview to *The Wire*, that "we cannot just retreat" and "have to be prepared to sacrifice our lives in the form of exposure to cold, exposure to heat or to Covid..." It is not a joke nor a sign of irresponsibility when an entire section of the population decides to court death because it is really a choice between two kinds of death.

Throughout July and August, there were tractor marches and protest meetings in villages, followed by submitting of memoranda to the district administration as well as to the chief minister and the prime minister. Between 7-10 September 2020, there was a call for a 'jail bharo andolan' and the movement clearly started building up towards greater mass support and militancy.

The point, in short, is that the movement in the early stages was being conducted keeping all the protocols of the Covid19 situation in mind but it was the criminal, pro-corporate intent of the government that actually had gambled on the possibility that the fear of the pandemic would keep the movement limited to such token forms as rooftop protests. Obviously, that was a hopeless miscalculation and the government alone has to be held responsible for pushing a large part of its population into a situation where retreat is no longer a possibility.

Transition to Political Struggle

The farmers' organizations and the SKM correctly estimated, especially once even the farcical 'talks' with the government broke down, that the next phase of the movement *could only be political*. It is elementary: If the farm laws do not go then the government that brought them on must go. How this can be achieved is really the question to be addressed in the coming months. In a sense, it was with this idea that the SKM leadership had decided to campaign in the recently concluded West Bengal elections with the explicit appeal to defeat the BJP, given that the outcomes in Kerala and Tamil Nadu were in any case not likely to yield it any ground. The effect of the farmers' struggle was also evident to some extent in the recent panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh, where from all accounts, the BJP did quite badly in many areas. Since panchayat elections aren't fought on party symbols, it is very difficult to know the exact picture but the overall setback for the BJP is quite evident. The *Indian Express* linked to earlier, quotes SKM leader Balbir Singh Rajewal saying in so many words that "We will make sure that the (BJP) faces defeat in [the upcoming Assembly elections] in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand as we did in West Bengal polls and Uttar Pradesh Panchayat elections," The message is clear: The struggle can now only be taken to the next, i.e. political stage.

It is heartening, in the meanwhile, that on the eve of the 'Black Day', 12 Opposition parties came out in support (<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/farmers-protest-opposition-parties-support-arm-laws-may-26-7326944/>) of the SKM's call, berating the government for its obduracy in the matter. The parties that signed the statement include JD(S), NCP, Trinamool Congress, JMM, Shiv Sena, JKPA, Samajwadi Party, RJD, DMK, CPI and CPI(M). This is an important step but it is at best, only a first step. That parties with such divergent political positions and conflicting interests could come together in support of the farmers' struggle is significant, but its impact is likely to be limited because of the differences among them. The government at the Centre might find some relief in the fact that when it comes to elections many of them may find themselves on the wrong side of one other.

While the support of political parties to the farmers' cause is important – and more of them need to come out in support – the critical issue here is that for the movement to transform into a broader anti-regime struggle, new constituencies and new forces need to join in. There are movements of the recent past, for instance the anti-CAA protests whose support has been unconditional for the farmers' struggle.

The most contentious issues under the new rules are – companies employing up to 300 workers need not require government approval of hire and fire (service condition and job security), workers need to give 60-day notice for strike (trade unionism), working hours may be extended to 12 hours (safety and health), and exclusion of many workers from social security net in bigger enterprises through contract or muster roll systems, and in smaller enterprises by making social security rules inapplicable.

And let us not forget that the worst toll that the pandemic has taken since last year has been of the poorest and most exploited migrant workers. They lost their jobs, walked thousands of miles back home, hungry and thirsty, some dying on the way. But there again, it became clear that the spirit of unionism, combining to struggle, just has not touched them. It is karma-theory all the way.

The difficulty here is that the crisis of trade unionism that has been evident at least from the mid-1980s onward, has actually never been confronted. The trade union movement has been in denial, unwilling to recognize that its crisis is deeply tied to the decimation of the working class itself, for one thing. For another, its crisis has been also tied to its inability to grasp that industry-based responses with token 'strikes' as the most knee-jerk form of action hardly pose any threat to employers. The selling of PSUs and undertakings like the railways or airports call for a political response, a political struggle – not token strikes in the already-failing industry.

It might be interesting as an aside to recall here what Nodeep Kaur, the young Dalit worker-activist had to say (<https://thewire.in/rights/dalit-activist-who-fought-for-workers-and-farmers-rights-faced-custodial-torture-alleges-family>) after she was arrested from the Kondli Industrial Area during a workers' struggle. Kondli is just next to the Singhu border protest site. The farmers' struggle was an inspiration to the workers struggling in that area, and Nodeep was drawn to it, getting gradually more involved.

As one report (<https://thewire.in/rights/dalit-activist-who-fought-for-workers-and-farmers-rights-faced-custodial-torture-alleges-family>) put it:

At the Singhu border, Nodeep mobilised the workers and the farmers in the area together, and at the Kundli border, slogans of 'kisan mazdoor ekta zindabaad' echoed, with the MAS and other labour unions joining hands with the farmers' front.

"Farmers and labourers are inseparable. Workers produce in the factories and farmers produce in the fields," Kaur had said in an interview, filmed days before her arrest. "The government is selling us, our work, our livelihood to make money for themselves," she had said.

"Everyday over 300 workers come to the protest site," Rajveer [Rajveer Kaur, Nodeep's sister] said.

What Rajveer Kaur says about workers coming to the Singhu protest site everyday is also confirmed by friends who have been going to the Tikri border protest. Workers from factories in the neighbouring areas often come in solidarity to the protest site after work, and also partake of the langar offered there to all visitors.

Perhaps, this moment when the farmers' struggle has stirred up a lot of latent energy in society and even pushed political parties, might also be the moment to build up a political movement of the working class that can join forces with it. It might infuse a new energy in the working class and trade union organizations and bring new forces into the struggle.

◀ [BLACK DAY](#) ◀ [FARMERS' STRUGGLE](#) ◀ [LABOUR CODES](#) ◀ [NODEEP KAUR](#) ◀ [SKM](#) ◀ [TRADE UNIONS](#)