

Huge Protests Flood Many Indian Cities

by Ramtanu Maitra

Feb. 26 (EIRNS)—Tens of thousands of trade union members demonstrated against rising food prices in New Delhi Feb. 23, under the leadership of G. Sanjeeva Reddy, a Congress Party member of Parliament, and president of the Congress Party-affiliated trade union INTUC. Other trade union organizations, including the CITU and the AITUC, also joined the rally. One estimate is that more than 100,000 participated in the protest march to the Indian Parliament. In addition to denouncing speculation in food, and deregulation of oil prices, many marchers carried placards in solidarity with the Egypt revolution.

Reddy said that he joined the protest march because the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government was not acting on the demands of the trade unions in the interest of the workers. “Leaders of the Congress Party are, first, servants of people. Due to price rises and unemployment, people are being forced to die, and so, we have joined the protest,” he said.

In addition to the protest in Delhi, thousands of trade union members in a number of other Indian cities carried out similar actions, while the Delhi march was joined by unionists from 19 Indian states. “We have come here so that our voices reverberate inside the house (Parliament), and they can see what pain the common man is going through,” said Akhil Samantray, who had come from Orissa to take part in the march.

A Message to Manmohan Singh

The demonstrations and protests were organized to send a message to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and the ruling UPA government, saying that if the common man’s interests are not protected in the annual budget, to be placed before the Parliament on Feb. 28, all trade unions will join hands with the vast majority of India’s poor, to escalate the level of protest and bring the government to its knees. Union members, who

handed their memorandum to the Parliament speaker, Meira Kumar, refused to give it to the Prime Minister, whom they rejected as “indifferent towards the working class.”

The protest was as much against the food price rise as it was against the World Bank-trained Singh, who, during his seven years as Prime Minister, has done nothing to improve conditions in rural India, where the vast majority of the country’s 1.2 billion people live.

It is clear that India is not immune from the global breakdown which is bringing people into the streets throughout the world. The reasons behind the events now unfolding in the Maghreb nations and in the Arabian Peninsula include a global financial collapse and a flood of trillions of dollars of bail-out money, which have sparked inflation all around; a steep rise in food prices affecting millions of families who can no longer feed their children; the absence of any nation, or group of nations, willing to address the immediate necessity to arrest the food price rise, and put in place a global financial system which allows investment to alleviate poverty; and a total disregard of the reality facing the poor and underprivileged, by those who only care about making money. All these conditions exist in India.

Will Egypt Come to India?

Can such uprisings like the ones in the Maghreb and the Arabian Peninsula happen in India? A senior Indian analyst stated: “We in India cannot afford to be overconfident that it can’t affect us. It can. If it does, due to our insensitivity and self-complacency, it will not have a pan-Indian impact. It will be an impact felt in some pockets where there is already people’s anger, as in the Northeast, or Jammu & Kashmir, or in the tribal areas of central India. We have to be alert. Being alert does not mean more security forces. It means actions to monitor the grievances and anger of the people and timely steps to address them.”

The ingredients to trigger an uprising exist in India.



It is estimated that more than 100,000 Indians marched to the parliament in Delhi Feb. 23, in protest against soaring food prices. In this Jan. 11 photo, women from Andhra Pradesh hold a picture of Prime Minister Singh (left), whom they hold responsible for out-of-control food price hikes.

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It could be triggered by one factor, with other factors coming into play to make it more powerful. India’s hundreds of millions of poor, who spend 80-90% of their income to buy food, and who continue to face a steep rise in food prices month after month, may not stay at home under such conditions.

India is not a food-short nation, but over the decades, its vast agricultural sector and small and medium size industries—the two sectors that together form the source of most of the jobs—were virtually neglected. The World Bank-trained Prime Minister, and his chief economic advisor, deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, another economist reared in the World Bank’s stable, have ignored these sectors in order to generate a “high rate of growth” to entice foreign investors and their foreign exchanges. As a result, the agricultural sector, under the Singh duo’s watch, has stagnated, showing a 2.0-2.5% growth rate, while GDP was growing at a rate close to 8%.

The non-investment in these sectors mean not providing absolutely necessary infrastructure in rural India, where at least 400 million live without electricity. Since the ruling UPA took over as the ruling party, with the Congress Party its main partner, under the leadership of Manmohan Singh, no serious effort has been made to manage India’s water supply, or to increase its power

generation capacity. India's extensive network of railroads remains clogged, and no effort has been made to modernize this vital sector, which provides the means of travel to the majority of Indians. Because of these conscious acts of omission, India's agricultural productivity has not risen during the last 15 years or so, and is presently about 50% of the productivity attained in China.

Such failures in these vital sectors, where a majority of Indians are employed, have kept the poor and underprivileged economically at least as vulnerable as they were two decades ago. Added to their misery, is the callousness of the UPA government, which has allowed food prices to rise steeply month after month. Last month alone, food prices rose by almost 12%. Despite false promises issued from time to time by the Prime Minister, prices of some basic food items, such as vegetables, cereals and pulses, which are the only food items that the poor can afford to consume, have risen by more than 100-150%. During this same period, their earnings in real terms have not increased by even half of that amount.

Prime Minister Singh may feign ignorance, but he could not have been unaware of the difficulties that the poor face in feeding their families, in light of rising prices. Last March, various political parties and other groups, in Assam, Manipur, and other northeastern states, and also in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, staged massive demonstrations against price rises. In Assam, 20,000 women, belonging to the Assam Mahila Parishad, the women's wing of regional party Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), vented their anger against the Congress-led central government.

Protests also rocked Manipur, with trade unions such as the All India Trade Union Congress, an affiliate of Communist Party of India; the All Manipur Trade Union Council, and the All Manipur Nupi Marup, staged mass demonstrations in Imphal, the capital of Manipur. The trade unions sought immediate measures from New Delhi to control food prices, as well as to end the sell-off of profit-making state-run companies, and to provide social security to laborers in both the organized and unorganized sector.

But all that fell on deaf ears. On Jan. 11, 2011, Singh convened a "special meeting" to discuss ways to rein in runaway food prices. The high-level meeting ostensibly discussed different possibilities, including doing away with import duties on food commodities such as sugar, and banning their export. It was widely characterized by analysts as a mere show. Prior to the "special

meeting," reports indicated that food prices rose by 18.32%, for the week that ended Dec. 25.

Not only was it evident from the outset, that the Singh government has not been interested in reining in prices, but the January figures show food prices rose by almost 12% again. Facing the attack launched by the opposition, the ruling Congress Party said the high-level meeting convened by the Prime Minister shows the UPA government's "sensitivity" towards the issue.

Time To Forget Business as Usual

However, it should be clear to Manmohan Singh and the UPA government that "business as usual" may not work much longer. Besieged by a series of huge money swindles, committed by politicians and the UPA-favored businessmen alike, the Prime Minister called in a number of electronic media editors to his home on Feb. 16 to convey to the country that he is "above all this" and he is not a "lame duck Prime Minister." He told the media: "I am not such a big culprit as is being projected. I wish to assure the country as a whole our government is dead serious to bring to book all the wrongdoers..." His statements drew derisive comments all over India.

It is also evident that the Singh government is now operating under a limited time frame. The Feb. 23 demonstrations were organized by trade union workers who have become victims of the steep food price rises, but they did not include the other victims—the vast majority of India's poor from the agriculture sector. If the tide is not turned quickly, they would surely join demonstrations in large numbers, and that could happen very soon.

On Feb. 24, following a two-day South Asia Conference of the Federation of Farmers' Associations, at Doddaballapur in the state of Karnataka, at a news conference, spokesperson Chukki Nanjundaswamy announced that, to protest the anti-farmer policies of the UPA, she would bring thousands of farmers from across the country to stage a demonstration in New Delhi on March 9.

She said the two-day conference condemned the exploitation of farmers worldwide in the name of economic development and special economic zones (SEZ). If the agricultural community in India was facing a multitude of problems arising out of the globalization and liberalization policies, the tillers of the land in such countries as Nepal, Bangladesh, and the African nations, have also become the victims, she said.