

MARXIST

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ASHOK DHAWALE

Peasant Struggles

The Maharashtra Experience

AIM OF AGRARIAN REVOLUTION

The Party Programme of the CPI(M) characterises the present stage of the Indian Revolution as the People's Democratic stage. The three main tasks set by it are anti-imperialist, anti-monopoly capital and anti-feudal. The agrarian revolution is considered as the axis of the People's Democratic Revolution. Explaining this, the Party Programme says in Para 3.15:

The agrarian question continues to be the foremost national question before the people of India. Its resolution requires revolutionary change, including radical and thoroughgoing agrarian reforms that target abolition of landlordism, moneylender-merchant exploitation and caste and gender oppression in the countryside. The bankruptcy of the bourgeois-landlord rule in India is nowhere more evident than in its failure to address, much less solve, the agrarian question in a progressive, democratic way.

To advance towards its aim of an agrarian revolution, the Communist Party and the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) led a series of momentous and historic struggles in the 1940s. These struggles have been engraved in letters of gold in the annals of the peasant movement in India. As is well known, they include the struggles of Tebhaga in Bengal, Punnapra Vayalar and North

Malabar in Kerala, Gana Mukti Parishad in Tripura, Surma Valley in Assam, East Thanjavur in Tamilnadu and Warli Adivasis in the Thane district of Maharashtra. They were crowned by the glorious armed peasant uprising in Telangana.

All these struggles were directed against feudalism in all its forms. They demanded the abolition of the zamindari system and advocated radical land reforms. They were fought with the land question as their central agenda. In the period after independence, it is no accident that it was only the Left-led state governments headed by the CPI(M) in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura that enacted legislation and carried out a programme of substantial land reforms and redistribution of land to the landless. A large section of the beneficiaries of these land reforms were Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

POST-INDEPENDENCE TRAJECTORY

The agrarian policies of successive Congress governments after independence were aimed at transforming semi-feudal landlords into capitalist landlords and developing a stratum of rich peasants. They also led to and further intensified class differentiation in the peasantry.

Analysing the Green Revolution, S.R. Pillai wrote, “The technology of the Green Revolution was introduced by the ruling classes with three clear-cut objectives: one, the fear of agrarian revolution; second, to develop capitalist relations in agriculture; third, to serve two types of interests, those of the Indian capitalists and of the multinational agri-business firms producing fertilisers, pesticides, weedicides and agricultural machineries. The technology of the Green Revolution was meant to increase productivity and production in agriculture making use of high-yielding seed varieties and modern inputs. It was claimed that once this technology was successfully implemented, India would not have to look back and an era of never ending agricultural

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prosperity would ensue. It soon became clear that this recipe for curing all agricultural ills was not meant for all the peasants and all the regions. It was based on a 'selective strategy' of distributing the seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, trillers, tractors only to those areas which have developed institutional infrastructure facilitated by irrigation, credit and other factors. This helped to increase productivity and production, but along with that, two types of inequalities also developed – the inequality between regions and the inequality between peasants.”

In the light of experience, the 23rd national conference of AIKS held at Varanasi in 1979 made an important departure. It stated as follows: “Taking note of these structural changes and their multifarious consequences, we have to come to the conclusion that that the slogan of complete abolition of landlordism and distribution of land to the landless and the land-poor continues to be the central slogan of the agrarian revolution, a slogan which we have to continue to propagate. But it is a slogan on which we cannot go into action today in most parts of the country. While continuing to propagate this as the central slogan, while continuing struggles for surplus land, benami lands, waste lands etc, the Kisan Sabha will have to take up for immediate action such issues as the question of wages of agricultural workers, house-sites, rent-reduction, 75 per cent of the produce to the sharecroppers, evictions, abolition or scaling down of rural indebtedness, remunerative price for agricultural produce, cheap credit, reduction of tax burdens and heavy levies like water charges, electricity rates etc, landlord goonda attacks with the connivance or direct help of the police, the social oppression of dalits, corruption in administration etc. These are the issues which affect all sections of the peasantry – poor, middle, rich – and they can all be drawn into the movement on them. All these currents have to be brought together to build the maximum unity of the peasantry centering around the agricultural workers and poor peasants to isolate the small stratum of landlords.”

The understanding at the Varanasi conference of AIKS was

further concretised in the 'Statement of Policy' adopted in the Golden Jubilee conference of AIKS at Patna in 1986.

ATTACK OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES

The neoliberal policies in the country, and in agriculture in particular, were begun by the Congress central government in 1991. The Party Programme states in Paras 3.23 and 3.22:

The liberalisation policies which followed the exhaustion of the State-sponsored capitalist development have led to the agricultural and rural development policies taking a dangerous and reactionary turn in the last decade of the twentieth century. These policies include decline in public investment in agriculture, in irrigation and other infrastructural work; credit from the formal sector has also sharply declined which hits the poor rural households the most. Schemes for rural employment and poverty alleviation have been cut back...Pressure is being mounted for the dilution of land ceiling laws by the states and for leasing out land to Indian big business and foreign agri-business. MNCs are entering the sphere of agricultural production. . . . With liberalisation, the MNCs which operate in the world market with advanced technologies at their command have a greater and direct control over the prices of agricultural commodities. The intensification of the exploitation of peasants through unequal exchange and violent fluctuations of prices has become a permanent feature. As a result, the peasant is fleeced both as a seller of agricultural produce and as a buyer of industrial inputs.

The 27th national conference of AIKS held at Hisar in 1992 was the first after the beginning of the neoliberal policies. It tore apart the neoliberal policies and warned, "The present policies of the Union government will have a serious adverse impact on the peasantry. This will speed up pauperization of the poor, the small and middle peasants. The number of unemployed youth, both in the urban and the rural sides will again rise to unprecedented

heights.” The seminal presidential address of Harkishan Singh Surjeet at this conference elaborated on these and other aspects further. Significantly, AIKS made this assessment of the neoliberal policies within a year, when all other peasant organisations were supporting the new economic and agricultural policies. The warnings of the Hisar conference were more than vindicated by agrarian developments over the last 25 years.

‘The Alternative Agricultural Policy’ document adopted by AIKS and the AIAWU in December 2003 broadly divided the post-independence period of capitalist development in agriculture into two phases – the state-sponsored phase from 1947 to 1990 and the liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation (LPG) phase from 1991 onwards. In the light of this, it outlined the two main rural contradictions as follows:

From the above analysis, it is clear that the present situation in Indian agriculture is characterised by two important contradictions. The first is the sharp division between the rural rich, comprising landlords, big capitalist farmers, large traders, money-lenders and their allies on the one hand and the mass of the peasantry, comprising agricultural workers, poor and middle peasants and rural artisans on the other. The second is the growing opposition to imperialist-driven LPG policies of the government, not only from the mass of the peasantry but also from sections of the rural rich.

In the liberalisation phase, the primitive accumulation of capital is ruining Indian agriculture and is assaulting the Indian peasantry. Land reforms have acquired a reverse meaning. It is no longer land to the tiller, but land to the corporates. This is glaringly seen in the policy of the Special Economic Zones, the various proposed industrial corridors and in the attempt by the Modi-led BJP government at the very beginning of its tenure to ram through the hated Land Acquisition Ordinance. This attempt was foiled through a combination of united peasant struggles on the ground and concerted opposition in the upper house in Parliament.

Profit-maximisation is being sought by squeezing the peasantry through neoliberal agricultural policies. It is precisely these policies that are fuelling the catastrophic phenomenon of lakhs of suicides of debt-ridden peasants in the last two and a half decades. Slashing of subsidies and an open door to rapacious MNCs and corporates in the production of agricultural inputs leading to massive increase in the cost of production, consistent refusal to give remunerative prices for agricultural produce under pressure of foreign finance capital, a glut in agricultural imports that further ruin the peasantry, a slew of free trade agreements, crunch in formal agricultural credit and siphoning it away to the corporates, this leading to increased dependence of farmers on usurious private moneylenders, a series of natural calamities like drought, floods, hailstorms as well as attacks by pests and by wild animals, a bogus crop insurance scheme designed to benefit not farmers but insurance companies, savage cuts in public investment on irrigation and power – these are some of the main aspects of the neoliberal attacks on agriculture that are responsible for rising peasant indebtedness and alarming peasant suicides.

WORST CULPRIT: BJP'S MODI REGIME

The present BJP central government led by Narendra Modi has been the worst culprit in intensifying neoliberal policies in agriculture, industry and all other sectors under imperialist dictates. BJP-led state governments have naturally followed suit.

Agrarian changes in the period of liberalisation were reviewed in the document 'Certain Tasks in Kisan and Agricultural Workers' Fronts based on the Directions of the Kolkata Plenum and Review of the Work of the Kisan Front' that was adopted by the CPI(M) central committee at Thiruvananthapuram in January 2017.

The General Secretary's Report to the 34th national conference of the All India Kisan Sabha held at Hisar, Haryana from October 3-6, 2017 analyses in detail the agrarian changes in the last 25

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years of liberalisation in the section titled ‘Changes in Agrarian Relations and Class Differentiation’. It then outlines the disastrous agrarian scenario in the country under the current BJP regime led by Narendra Modi which has betrayed every single promise of ‘Achhe Din’ made to farmers by the BJP election manifesto of 2014. For lack of space, we shall here just enumerate some of the major aspects and results of BJP rule over the last four years that have been analysed in that report. These are:

- Intensified agrarian crisis and unabated peasant suicides;
- Rapid increase in landlessness and land inequality;
- Unprecedented land grab and dispossession of the peasantry;
- Attack on forest rights and loot of resources;
- Financial liberalisation and indebtedness;
- Enamour for free trade and economic liberalism;
- Demonetisation and GST attack on the peasantry;
- Corporatisation of agriculture;
- Doubling farmers’ woes instead of incomes;
- Incessant fall in agricultural prices;
- Acute human tragedy amidst drought, floods and government apathy;
- Attack on MNREGA and rural employment;
- Increased vulnerability of women in agriculture;
- Notification restricting cattle trade;
- Menace of wild animals and stray cattle;
- Climate change and compromise at Paris summit;
- And grave authoritarian and communal attacks on democracy and secularism.

NATIONWIDE PEASANT RESISTANCE

It is not surprising that peasant resistance to the agrarian policies of the BJP government has broadened and intensified. This peasant resistance today is centred around two main areas: the struggles

on land and land-related issues; the struggles against agrarian distress, which have naturally revolved around liberation from debt and remunerative prices.

In the struggle against the Land Acquisition Ordinance, AIKS took the initiative to bring several peasant and social organisations together to form a broad platform called the Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan (BAA). This has taken up several land-related issues, and also those related to the killing of farmers by cow vigilantes. State units of the BAA have been formed in a number of states.

Another broad platform which now comprises over 190 farmers' organisations called the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) was set up after the Mandsaur police firing in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh in June 2017. It took up the two key issues of the vast mass of the peasantry of India today, viz. loan waiver and remunerative prices as per the C2 + 50 formula of the National Commission on Farmers (NCF) headed by Dr M S Swaminathan. After a countrywide campaign, a massive two day Kisan Sansad of tens of thousands of farmers from across the country, and also a novel Mahila Kisan Sansad, was held on Parliament Street in New Delhi on November 20-21, 2017. Two bills on the above two issues have been painstakingly prepared, consultation meetings have been held in most of the states and they will be tabled before Parliament.

AIKS itself has taken up several independent struggles in many states like Rajasthan, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere. Of these, the Rajasthan Kisan struggle has been one of the most consistent and noteworthy. Another remarkable and consistent struggle has been going on in Maharashtra since 2015. We shall take a brief look at the glorious history of AIKS in Maharashtra and then come to recent struggles that led up to the unprecedented Kisan Long March in March 2018.

Two shocking objective facts serve to explain the massive response to the peasant struggles in Maharashtra in recent years.

One, the question of farmers' suicides. Since the advent of neoliberal policies in agriculture begun by the Congress government in 1991 and carried forward with great speed by successive Congress and BJP governments – the Modi government being the worst culprit – 400,000 debt-ridden farmers in India have been forced to commit suicide in the past twenty-five years. These figures come from the National Crime Records Bureau of the Union Home Ministry. Maharashtra has the notorious distinction of being the largest 'graveyard of farmers', accounting for nearly 75,000 peasant suicides in the same period.

Two, the question of starvation of Adivasi children. Thousands of Adivasi children in the state, and also all over the country, die every year due to malnutrition and starvation – a result of multiple factors such as landlessness and unemployment as well as the breakdown of the public distribution system and the health care system.

These two searing facts are enough to throw a blinding light on the deepening agrarian crisis and agrarian distress in the state and the country.

So far as the agrarian scenario in Maharashtra is concerned, that has been analysed in some detail by this writer in the article titled "Agrarian Challenges in Maharashtra Today" that was published in *Marxist*, April-June 2014, Volume XXX 2.

A LOOK BACK AT HISTORY

The seeds of AIKS in Maharashtra were planted in the second quarter of the twentieth century. It is a remarkable record which is not so widely known. Let us draw a thumbnail sketch of some of the main events in its glorious history.

In the historic struggles against caste and against landlordism that were led by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in the 1920s and 1930s, R.B. More and Shamrao Parulekar were two prominent leaders who participated. Both of them later joined the Communist Party. R.B. More was one of the main organisers of the famous 1927 Chowdar Lake Satyagraha at Mahad in Raigad district that was led by Dr Ambedkar. It demanded the basic right of Dalits to draw water from that lake. Dr Ambedkar and Shamrao Parulekar led a huge 8,000-strong peasant demonstration on the Mumbai Assembly in 1938 against the 'Khoti' system of landlordism that was then prevalent in the Konkan region. Remarkably, the peasants had all come to Mumbai by boat from the then Ratnagiri district of Konkan region.

Another important fact connected with the working class was that, when the Congress interim government elected in 1937 proclaimed a Black Act against the working class, the Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party led by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar came together and led a massive joint campaign and a general strike in Mumbai against this Act on November 7, 1938. Significantly, this day marked the 21st anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia.

The All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) was formed at its foundation conference at Lucknow on April 11, 1936. Some delegates from Maharashtra attended it. The second conference of AIKS was held at Faizpur in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra on December 25-26, 1936. M A Rasul, in his detailed work *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha*, has recorded that, "About 500 kisan marchers led by V.M. Bhuskute and J. Bukhari started from Manmad on 12 December and marched over a 200-mile trek and reached Tilaknagar, Faizpur at noon on 25 December carrying the Red Flag and shouting kisan slogans. On arrival there they were received by Jawaharlal Nehru (Congress president), Shankar Rao Deo (Congress Reception Committee chairman), M.N. Roy, Maniben Mulji, Narendra Dev, besides kisan leaders like Swamiji, Ranga,

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Yagnik, Jaiprakash Narayan, Bankim Mukherji and Shibnath Banerji, also S.A. Dange, M.R. Masani, Yusuf Meherali and other Congress, kisan and labour leaders.”

Peasant struggles on various issues intensified in the mid-1930s in Thane, Nashik, Ahmednagar and other districts. AIKS had chosen Shamrao Parulekar to be its organiser in Maharashtra. In 1942, after their release from a two-year British jail term for leading the anti-war campaign, Shamrao and Godavari Parulekar began work in AIKS in right earnest. In 1943-44, the Kisan Sabha was started by them in the Kalyan, Murbad and Shahapur tehsils of Thane district. Shamrao and Godavari met P. Sundarayya and M. Basavapunniah, the future leaders of the historic Telangana armed peasant struggle, with whom they continued to have very close relations throughout their lives.

The foundation conference of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha was held on January 12, 1945 at Titwala in Thane district. Godavari has recorded that she, along with other activists, covered over 700 villages on foot and addressed 160 public meetings for this conference. More than 7,000 poor and middle peasants and agricultural workers from several districts attended this first state conference of the Kisan Sabha. She has also recorded that among the top leaders who addressed the conference were P. Sundarayya, P. Krishna Pillai, B.T. Ranadive, M.A. Rasul, Teja Singh Swatantra and N.M. Joshi. The conference elected a 33-member state kisan council. Buwa Nawale from Akole tehsil of Ahmednagar district was elected the first president, Shamrao Parulekar the first general secretary and Godavari Parulekar the first joint secretary of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha, among others.

It was this conference that unleashed the historic Adivasi Revolt led by the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha in Thane district. This revolt which began in May 1945 continued for over two years. It abolished all forms of slavery and bonded labour, increased wages of agricultural labourers and succeeded to an extent in giving land to the tiller. This struggle is documented

in detail in Shamrao Parulekar's book *Revolt of the Warlis* and in Godavari Parulekar's book *Adivasis Revolt*. The Adivasi Revolt gave its first five martyrs on October 10, 1945, when the British police, who were in league with a plot hatched by the landlord lobby, fired mercilessly on a peaceful gathering of over 30,000 Adivasis at Talwada, near the Talasari tehsil of Thane district. Comrade Jethya Gangad was among those who were killed in this state repression. There have been a total of 61 martyrs of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha in Thane-Palghar district since 1945 – victims of successive British, Congress and BJP regimes, and 3 martyrs in Nashik district. Most of them have been tribals.

The foundation of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha and the Warli Adivasi Revolt were the culmination of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle waged by Shamrao and Godavari Parulekar in the pre-independence era.

From 1943 to 1946, in another historic struggle, British rule was overthrown for three and a half years and a 'Parallel Government' (Prati Sarkar) was established in Satara and Sangli districts of Western Maharashtra. It had the full support and backing of the peasantry. This revolt was led by 'Krantisimha' (Lion of the Revolution) Nana Patil, who later joined the Communist Party and was also elected AIKS national president in the 13th AIKS Conference that took place at Dahanu in Thane district in May 1955.

On August 15, 1947, independence dawned over India at last. But on that day, over 600 Adivasis from Thane district owing allegiance to the Red Flag of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha woke up to freedom in Congress jails, as did thousands of other Communists all across the country. The most famous among them was, of course, a legendary leader of the Indian people – A.K. Gopalan, who was to lead AIKS as its national president for several years.

The liberation of large parts of Dadra and Nagarhaveli from Portuguese rule from July 24 to August 3, 1954, under the armed

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leadership of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha in Thane district, was a major event in the post-independence period. This struggle was directly led by Shamrao and Godavari. L B Dhangar and hundreds of Adivasi comrades participated in this liberation struggle.

The holding of the 13th national conference of AIKS at Dahanu in Thane district from May 19-22, 1955, braving all manner of repression and obstacles by the government, was another significant event in the history of the Kisan movement in Maharashtra. Towering leaders of AIKS like P. Sundarayya, A.K. Gopalan, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Hare Krishna Konar, N. Prasada Rao, M.A. Rasul, Bankim Mukherjee, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, Dasharath Deb, B. Srinivas Rao, Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri and others attended the conference which was accompanied by a massive rally. Shamrao and Godavari were the moving spirits behind this conference and Kratisimha Nana Patil was elected as AIKS president.

Another leader from Maharashtra, Godavari Parulekar, would also be elected national president of AIKS at its 25th Conference, which was its Golden Jubilee session at Patna. She is the only woman to have held the post so far. In earlier times, Shamrao Parulekar had also been an AIKS central office-bearer for many years.

In the 1950s, democratic movements for the formation of linguistic states were unleashed in many parts of the country. The ruling Congress Party went back on its pre-independence pledge to form such states. This was the reason for the movements like Aikya Keralam, Vishal Andhra, Samyukta Maharashtra and Maha Gujarat that swept these states in the decade of the 1950s. The Samyukta Maharashtra movement, from 1956 to 1960, was led by the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, which comprised four main parties – the Communist Party, the Praja Samajwadi Party, the Peasants and Workers Party and the Republican Party. It engulfed the state, with the peasantry and working class both joining it

in huge numbers. In the massive repression that followed, 106 martyrs were killed in police firing. Most of them were from the working class in Mumbai and the rest were peasants.

This movement dealt a massive blow to the Congress Party in the 1957 elections to parliament and the state assembly. Several leaders of the above four parties won the elections. Among those elected to parliament were AIKS leaders Shamrao Parulekar and Krantisimha Nana Patil and another towering RPI peasant leader Dadasaheb Gaikwad. Many AIKS leaders who were Communists were elected to the state assembly. Eventually, the central government was forced to concede the demand, and the state of Maharashtra was formed with Mumbai as its capital on May Day – May 1, 1960.

In 1958, a big joint statewide struggle for land was launched in Maharashtra. The significant aspect of this struggle was that blue flags of the Republican Party led by Karmaveer Dadasaheb Gaikwad and red flags of the Communist Party and AIKS led by Shamrao, Godavari, Nana Patil, R.B. More and others came together in it. Thousands of Dalits, Adivasis and other landless took part in the satyagrahas and filled the jails. The government was forced to make some concessions.

In 1960, the Kisan Sabha led by Shamrao and Godavari took up the vital demand of vesting forest plots in the names of the Adivasis who have been cultivating them for decades. Thousands of acres of land were vested in the names of Adivasis as a result of this struggle, until the draconian Forest Conservation Act of 1980 put a stop to the entire process. Ever since then, large struggles of Adivasis have been led by AIKS in several districts of Maharashtra to press this demand. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) passed by Parliament in December 2006, although it marks an important advance on paper, leaves much to be desired as regards its implementation. Massive struggles of the Adivasi peasantry have been waged by AIKS in Maharashtra in recent years towards this end.

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Shamrao Parulekar, who had been elected to the first central committee of the CPI(M) in its foundation 7th Congress at Kolkata in 1964, was in detention in the Arthur Road Jail in Mumbai. He suddenly died due to a massive heart attack at the age of 63 on August 3, 1965. It was a shattering blow for Godavari, who was also in the same jail at the time. It was an equally shattering blow for AIKS and for the Kisan movement.

In 1968, AIKS split at the All India level, and in 1969 the 7th state conference of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha was held in the village called Moha in the Beed district of Marathwada region, with the initiative taken by Gangadhar Appa Burande. AIKS general secretary Hare Krishna Konar attended this conference which decided the future course of the Kisan Sabha in Maharashtra. Godavari Parulekar was elected its president and continued in that post for more than two decades.

In 1972-73, a grave drought hit Maharashtra and the Kisan Sabha, led by stalwarts like Godavari Parulekar, Gangadhar Appa Burande, Narendra Malusare, Ramchandra Ghangare, Vithalrao Naik, L.B. Dhangar, Krishna Khopkar, Lahanu Kom and others led big peasant struggles for drought relief. CITU in Maharashtra extended fraternal help and this illustrated the concept of worker-peasant unity in action. Joint struggles on this issue were also launched along with peasant organisations led by other Left parties. Police firing led to the death of peasants at Islampur in Sangli district and at Vairag in Solapur district. This led to a statewide uproar. It was as a result of these struggles that the state government was forced to start two important schemes – the Employment Guarantee Scheme (the precursor to the MNREGA) and the Monopoly Cotton Procurement Scheme. It was during the great drought of 1972 that Godavari Parulekar and Narendra Malusare started work through struggle in the Surgana tehsil and other tribal areas of Nashik district. From that arose gradually the next major bastion of AIKS in Maharashtra.

In the struggle against the hated Emergency imposed by the

Congress regime from 1975 to 1977, several opposition party leaders were arrested and detained for 19 months. During the Emergency itself, Godavari Parulekar led a successful struggle for the release of over 1000 debt slaves in the Wada tehsil of Thane district. In the general elections of 1977, the authoritarian Congress was routed. In that election, three CPI(M) leaders – Ahilya Rangnekar from Mumbai, Lahanu Kom from Thane district and Gangadhar Appa Burande from Beed district – were elected to the Lok Sabha as part of a united front. The latter two were prominent AIKS leaders. In the 1978 state assembly elections, 9 MLAs of the CPI(M) were elected on an anti-authoritarian platform. They included four AIKS leaders – Vithalrao Naik from Parbhani district, Shankar Chavan and Barkya Kurhada from Thane district and Jiva Pandu Gavit from Nashik district.

By the early 1990s, however, AIKS in Maharashtra had basically become limited to its two main tribal bastions in Thane and Nashik districts and to three other traditional districts of Beed and Parbhani in the Marathwada region and Wardha in the Vidarbha region. It was in the mid-1990s that systematic efforts were made to inject new young blood in AIKS, mainly from student and youth organisations like SFI and DYFI. This had a salutary impact, and AIKS rapidly spread to 25 districts in the state. The other two major initiatives taken in recent years were to try and transcend the traditional tribal base of AIKS by taking up burning issues of the mass of the peasantry of Maharashtra through struggles and to change the form of struggles to make them more confrontational.

Accordingly, several statewide and local struggles on burning issues of the peasantry were led by AIKS especially in the post-1991 era of imperialist globalisation in the wake of its severe attack on agriculture and the peasantry. Only a very few major struggles led by AIKS in the new century may be briefly mentioned.

- A joint and militant struggle led by AIKS from 2007 to 2010, in alliance with the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) and other

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organisations, against the proposed 25,000-acre MahaMumbai SEZ allotted to Reliance Industries of Mukesh Ambani in three tehsils of Raigad district adjoining Mumbai. This proposed SEZ would have uprooted 45 villages, root and branch. The struggle entailed two huge rallies of over 50,000 peasants each, one of which had CPI(M) leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sitaram Yechury as the main speaker, and a referendum in which over 98 per cent of the peasants refused to part with their land. The state government was finally forced to denotify the MahaMumbai SEZ, which was a historic victory for the peasantry not only of Maharashtra, but of the whole country.

- A massive independent statewide Jail Bharo stir in January 2011 for the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and on burning issues like peasant suicides, in which over 1 lakh peasants courted arrest.
- Revival of the same struggle for FRA implementation and on the question of severe drought in April 2013, in which over 50,000 peasants conducted Rasta Roko at several centres for over 40 hours. The state government was forced to concede several demands in talks with AIKS on April 17.
- Independent statewide demonstrations of 1.25 lakh rural poor in 2012 for their demand for inclusion in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) lists. The struggle was successful in some districts, where the names of thousands of rural poor were included in the BPL lists.
- The other major struggles in recent years after 2015 have been outlined below.

51 years after Thane district hosted the 13th national conference of AIKS in May 1955, it was Nashik district that hosted the 31st national conference of AIKS in January 2006, with an unprecedented one lakh-strong peasant rally representing 30 districts of Maharashtra. Godavari Parulekar would have been the happiest had she lived to see it.

Godavari Parulekar passed away at the ripe old age of 89 on October 8, 1996. The day on which she was cremated at Talasari in the erstwhile Thane (now Palghar) district on October 10 was also the day 51 years ago in 1945 when the first five martyrs of the historic Adivasi Revolt were mercilessly gunned down by the venal nexus of the landlords and the imperialists. AIKS President S. Ramachandran Pillai and CITU leader Mohd. Amin attended the funeral. October 10 is observed every year by means of large rallies in Thane-Palghar district as Martyrs' Day and also as the Godavari Parulekar Death Anniversary Day.

RECENT MASS STRUGGLES

The remarkable Kisan Long March from March 6-12, 2018, was the culmination of three years of constant struggle led by AIKS in Maharashtra since October 2015.

A state-wide AIKS campaign called the Peasants Rights Awareness Campaign was launched for a month from October 5 to November 10, 2015. Extended AIKS district council meetings were held in 24 districts of the state. AIKS leaders Dr Ashok Dhawale, Kisan Gujar and Dr Ajit Nawale, along with other state office-bearers, attended all these meetings. In these meetings, the burning issues of peasant struggle were identified, the nature of the struggle was discussed, and the steps for organisational strengthening were decided.

In the second week of December 2015, over 50,000 peasants under the AIKS banner came on to the streets in 29 tehsil centres of 15 districts in all the five regions of the state on the four issues of land rights, loan waiver, remunerative prices and drought relief.

On January 7 and 8, 2016 respectively, AIKS held two regional-level loan-waiver and drought relief conventions at Selu in Parbhani district for the Marathwada region, and at Malkapur in Buldana district for the Vidarbha region. Both were well-attended.

AIKS and its allied organisations – the Centre of Indian

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Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Agricultural Workers Union (AIAWU) – held a joint state convention on October 31 at Parbhani. A call was given for a joint action on January 19, 2018. That day, over 1,33,000 workers, peasants and agricultural workers held a massive joint state-wide *jail bharo* [fill the jails] stir for their demands against the BJP-led central and state governments. The largest number of those arrested – over 92,000 – was of AIKS.

On January 28, AIKS held a state-level convention in Nashik that gave a clarion call for an unprecedented state-wide siege (*mahapadav*) of 100,000 peasants from March 29 onwards in Nashik city. This struggle call was the culmination of the six-month long AIKS campaign in Maharashtra outlined above. Two lakh persuasive and attractive leaflets and 12,000 posters for the campaign were published by AIKS and they were distributed to all the districts in the convention itself. District councils later also published thousands of leaflets.

From February 7 to March 1, 23 AIKS district conferences were held after village and *tehsil* conferences. They prepared for the struggle and also strengthened the organisation.

ONE LAKH PEASANTS LAY SIEGE TO NASHIK

As a result of all these intensive preparations, AIKS held a historic one lakh-strong independent state-wide rally on March 29, 2016, followed by an unprecedented day and night sit-in *satyagraha* for two days and two nights on March 29-30 at the CBS Chowk in the heart of Nashik. This *satyagraha* paralysed the city. AIKS highlighted four issues for struggle:

- Land rights under the Forest Rights Act (2006).
- Loan waiver for peasants.
- Higher remunerative prices.
- Drought relief.

This militant peasant action received massive and sustained coverage in both print and electronic media. Sections of the electronic media covered it live on both days. This struggle placed AIKS at the centre stage of the peasant movement in Maharashtra after a long time.

The rally was addressed by CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury, AIKS General Secretary Hannan Mollah, renowned journalist P Sainath, AIKS leaders Dr Ashok Dhawale, J.P. Gavit MLA, Kisan Gujar, Dr Ajit Nawale and leaders of other mass organisations.

On March 30, the beleaguered Maharashtra Chief Minister Shri Devendra Fadnavis invited the Kisan Sabha for talks. A one hour discussion was held with the Chief Minister, three other Ministers and senior officials in the Vidhan Bhavan in Mumbai in the midst of the assembly session. Some of the demands were conceded, but were never implemented. AIKS, therefore, began concerted struggles for their implementation.

STRUGGLE FOR DROUGHT RELIEF

On May 3, 2016, around 1000 peasants and students from all the eight districts of the Marathwada region, led by AIKS and the Students Federation of India (SFI), broke two police barricades and marched right inside the compound of the Aurangabad Divisional Commissioner's office. This militant action was conducted for the burning demands related to the grim drought situation in the region. The agitators occupied the office for over an hour until the officers agreed to hold a meeting with the AIKS-SFI delegation the next day, in which all officials dealing with drought-related issues were summoned from all the eight districts. For two days and one night on May 3 and 4, all the agitators camped right outside the Commissionerate.

Under this pressure, in the meeting that was held on May 4,

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most of the major demands that lay within the administration's purview were conceded. The specific demands that were conceded related to the provision of drinking water, work and wages under MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employee Guarantee Act of 2005), fodder for cattle, agricultural inputs for peasants, fee waiver for students, land issues related to temple lands and forest lands and so on. The grave nature of the drought and the militant actions of AIKS and SFI forced the print and electronic media to cover the Aurangabad struggle.

10,000-STRONG 'COFFIN RALLY' IN THANE

AIKS led a 10,000-strong novel 'Coffin Rally' in Thane city, near Mumbai on May 30, 2016 to focus on the issue of peasant suicides. The peasants carried bamboo frames (called *tirdi* in Marathi) covered with white cloth, on which dead bodies are carried. This dramatically highlighted the grave issue of suicides of debt-ridden peasants in Maharashtra. This rally, which was addressed by AIKS President Amra Ram, was widely covered by the media, especially since it highlighted the grave issue of mounting peasant suicides. The subsequent state conference at Talasari in Palghar district on May 31 and June 1 was attended by AIKS General Secretary Hannan Mollah.

50,000-STRONG MAHA-GHERAO IN WADA

On October 3-4, 2016, over 50,000 Adivasi peasants, women, youth and students from various tribal districts of Maharashtra held a *gherao* of the house of the BJP Tribal Development Minister at the sub divisional centre of Wada in Palghar district. The struggle was jointly led by AIKS, All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), SFI and Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch (AARM). The main issues were the stringent and immediate implementation of the Forest Rights

Act, malnutrition-related tribal child deaths, work and wages under MNREGA, the plight of the PDS, health services and the educational problems of tribal students.

The *gherao* continued for 16 hours and all highways leading from Wada to Mumbai, Thane, Bhiwandi, Palghar, Dahanu, Talasari, Surat and Nashik were completely blocked. The minister had fled a day before in fear of this action. When the people refused to move, the Minister had to send the state Tribal Development Commissioner for talks with the delegation and had to send a fax agreeing to a high-powered meeting in the state secretariat at Mumbai on October 7. It was only after a four-hour nightlong discussion with the Commissioner, where he conceded many demands, that the *gherao* was lifted at dawn on October 4 with a huge public meeting.

The meeting of the delegation with the Tribal Development Minister, half a dozen secretaries of related departments and half a dozen district collectors of tribal districts took place in Mumbai on October 7. It continued for over five hours. The minister was forced to concede several long-standing demands about FRA implementation, malnutrition-related tribal child deaths, MNREGA and PDS-related demands, education and other issues. The minutes of the meeting and a special government circular were released to all concerned officials in the state, which put the demands conceded in writing. This struggle resulted in a major victory. There was some initial progress in implementation, but it then floundered.

WHIPCORD RALLY AT KHAMGAON

On May 11, 2017, AIKS organised an 'Aasood' (Whipcord) State Convention followed by the 'Aasood' State Rally to the house of the BJP state Agriculture Minister at Khamgaon in Buldana district of Vidarbha region to focus on the issues of peasant suicides, loan waiver and remunerative prices. Mahatma Jotirao

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Phule had written a celebrated book in 1881 titled *The Whipcord of the Peasant* (Shetkaryacha Aasood). It was from this that the Whipcord Rally was named (the whipcord is a form of braided cotton, used to make cloth or whips).

All these independent struggles over two years put the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha for the first time in the mainstream of the peasant movement in the state and helped it to become a key constituent of the united peasant struggle that began in June 2017.

HISTORIC FARMERS' STRIKE

In the historic united Farmers Strike that lasted for 11 days from June 1 to 11, 2017, AIKS played a crucial role. Farmers refused to get their milk, vegetables and fruits for sale in the markets in the cities. AIKS took the lead in bringing other farmers' organisations together to continue the strike when some blacklegs tried a sell-out in a midnight meeting with the Chief Minister on June 2/3. Due to his role in opposing this sell-out at that meeting, AIKS state general secretary Dr Ajit Nawale was elected Convenor of the Coordination Committee of Farmers' Organisations. A massive joint Maharashtra Bandh was successfully held on June 5 to support the farmers strike, followed by other large mass actions.

On June 11, a group of five Ministers of the state government was forced to hold talks with the Coordination Committee and they publicly agreed to give a complete loan waiver to the peasantry. But within a fortnight, although it announced a deceptive loan waiver package of Rs 34,000 crore and a waiver of up to Rs 1.5 lakh per farmer, it betrayed its promise of a complete loan waiver and imposed several onerous conditions that would leave a great majority of farmers out of the loan waiver orbit.

Massive joint agitations were held against this betrayal, including a united campaign tour of 15 large district conventions in July that mobilised over 40,000 farmers despite the monsoons and a state-wide *Chakka Jaam* (Road Blockade) on August 14 in

which over two lakh farmers blocked national and state highways at over 200 centres in 31 districts of the state. AIKS participation in this joint Road Blockade action was the largest – over 85,000.

By a conscious decision, all the above independent and united struggles by AIKS were peaceful and disciplined. Throughout the campaign for all these struggles, apart from concentrating fire on the BJP-Shiv Sena state government, the BJP-led central government of Narendra Modi was also severely castigated for its anti-peasant, anti-people, pro-crony corporate and neoliberal policies and its dangerous communal and casteist conspiracies.

When the state government refused to relent on both the crucial aspects of loan waiver and land rights, AIKS again decided to take up cudgels against the betrayal of the BJP state government, and took the decision of the Long March and the Assembly Gherao.

UNPRECEDENTED KISAN LONG MARCH

It was truly an amazing struggle, the like of which has not been seen in Maharashtra in recent times. It caught the imagination of the peasantry and the people, and received their unstinted support, not only in the state, but all over the country. It received the backing of parties and organisations all across the political spectrum. During the week of March 6th to March 12th, the Long March of nearly 200 kilometres became the centre of attention for the entire national and state media. Print, electronic and social media resonated with the march. The number one hashtag in India for March 12th was #KisanLongMarch.

The Long March began in Nashik. Twenty-five thousand farmers, including thousands of women, took the first steps. The March concluded in Mumbai with over 50,000 farmers. It was an ocean of red – the red flag of the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), red banners, red flags, red caps and red placards with our slogans.

The largest mobilisation of peasants came from Nashik district. Thousands of Adivasi peasants, under the inspiring leadership of

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AIKS former state president J.P. Gavit (a seven-time and current Member of the Legislative Assembly in Maharashtra from the CPI-M). The next largest contingent came from the Thane-Palghar district, followed by the Ahmednagar district. Farmers came from other districts as well. Their numbers swelled on the last two days of the Long March.

CONDEMNATION OF BJP'S BETRAYAL

During the past two years, the BJP central and state government had given certain specific assurances to the Indian peasantry. They had said that they would accept the demands for a series of concerns, such as:

- Farm loan waiver.
- Remunerative prices.
- Implementation of the recommendations from the National Commission of Farmers (2006), chaired by Dr. M.S. Swaminathan.
- Stringent implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).
- Increase in various pension schemes for poor peasants and agricultural workers.
- Compensation for losses sustained by farmers due to the disastrous pest attacks (such as pink bollworm on cotton).
- Vesting of temple and pasture lands in the name of the tiller.
- Opposition to acquisition of peasant land in the name of fancy and elitist projects, such as the bullet train and super highways.
- Issues connected to the public distribution system.
- Complete change in the river linking scheme that is to start in Nashik, Thane and Palghar districts. AIKS demands that the tribal villages not be submerged and that the water is made available to these districts and to other drought-prone districts in Maharashtra.

Over the past two years, the BJP governments at the centre

and at the state have betrayed all their assurances given to the peasantry. The above list of demands and grievances has been ignored. The Kisan Sabha organised the Long March to condemn the BJP state and central government for their consistent betrayals.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE LONG MARCH

In Sangli, at the AIKS State Council meeting on February 16, a decision was taken to hold the Long March. The AIKS collective state leadership began to make meticulous preparations for this enormous endeavour. We had barely 17 days before the March was to begin. AIKS began the March on March 6, a few days after Holi (March 1 and March 2). The State Assembly would be in session.

The most important task was mobilisation of peasants for the March. Hundreds of meetings were held in the villages, thousands of leaflets were distributed, and registration drives were conducted. A press conference was held in Mumbai on February 21 and at Nashik on March 2 to publicise the Long March.

The question has often been asked – how were the logistics of the Long March dealt with? Rice, dal, chillies, oil and firewood for the food of the participants was collected by peasants from the villages themselves and was stored in several tempos. The tempos used to go ahead of the marchers and volunteers would cook and keep the food ready for the marchers when they reached the designated spots every day for lunch and dinner. Hired water tankers for drinking were stationed at various points along the way. An ambulance with a doctors' team of Kisan Sabha sympathisers and the necessary medicines collected by the CITU-affiliated Medical Representatives Union were kept along with the Long March. AIKS state and Nashik district office bearers made three reconnaissance trips from Nashik to Mumbai and back to decide on the appropriate places to have lunch, dinner and to rest in the night. This was in itself a difficult task.

The marchers walked an average of 30 to 35 km per day in the

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scorching sun and on the second last day, the distance that had to be covered stretched to 43 km! It goes without saying that all AIKS leaders walked with the peasants throughout.

There were thousands of women in the march. Their grit and determination was amazing – and also humbling. Many of them walked barefoot, with bruised and bleeding feet. These women were specially lauded and saluted.

The way that tens of thousands of poor and landless peasants marched relentlessly with determination 30 to 35 km per day for seven days in scorching heat, hundreds of them barefoot, bruised and bleeding on tar roads, stirred the conscience of the nation. It evoked not only massive public support for their cause, but also massive public anger against the callous and insensitive BJP-led state government. It made people aware of the economic injustice and social inequality prevailing in the country. This sight must have made many people want to fight against injustice and inequality.

During and after the strenuous march every night, hundreds of men and women still had the energy to sing and dance to the tune of their quaint musical instruments. Culture was an inseparable part of their lives. That they did this night after night despite all the physical exertion was indeed admirable and it enthused all others too.

OVERWHELMING RESPONSE FROM THE PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA

The people responded with great love and appreciation for the Long March. People from the working-class and the middle-class – Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits – welcomed the March with open arms in several localities. Groups of hundreds of people, including youth and women in large numbers, congregated at various spots en route to felicitate the marchers. They donated generously – both in cash and in kind. Ordinary people came forward to give us water, *sharbat*, biscuits, food and even footwear. In my 40 years

of life in the Left movement, I must admit that I have never come across such a spontaneous outpouring of support and solidarity.

Many of the ordinary people who met us in Mumbai city, including several media persons and even some in the police explained to us the reason for their solidarity. This is the sum and substance of what they said – we are also the children of farmers; our roots lie in the villages; we know the plight of farmers; and that is why we have come out in your support.

The biggest and most spontaneous reception to the Long March was in the Dalit locality of Mata Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar at Ghatkopar in Mumbai, the very place that had seen the shooting down of 11 Dalits in police firing under the BJP-Shiv Sena regime 20 years ago. The Dabbawalas of Mumbai also contributed their mite to the cause. In the most touching move, farmers from Raigad district under the leadership of the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) brought 1.5 lakh rice *bhakris* and dry fish for the marchers on the last day at Azad Maidan. CITU, AIDWA, DYFI and SFI in Mumbai and Thane-Palghar districts launched a campaign amongst the people in support of this Long March, but the mass response went far beyond that. This response of the people further steeled the marchers in their resolve.

The CPI(M) Maharashtra State Committee had, of course, given full support to this Long March right from the beginning. Another Left party, the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) also supported it throughout. CPI leaders were present at Nashik to greet the march when it began. All other political parties except the BJP – viz. Congress, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Samajwadi, Republican, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and also the Shiv Sena, which is a partner in the state government, openly supported the Kisan Sabha Long March and their top leaders either joined the march for a time or pledged their support when it had stopped for the night at Sion or when it culminated at Azad Maidan. The massive response of the

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people and the media was the key reason for this unprecedented support of many unlikely forces right across the political spectrum.

The print, electronic and social media all over the country played a magnificent role. That highlighted not only the Kisan Long March but also the deep agrarian crisis and burning peasant issues with relevance for the whole country. It began with a video taken by Dr Ajit Nawale of tens of thousands of farmers marching down the hill of the Kasara Ghat near Igatpuri on the morning of day three, with the picturesque view of hills on one side and valleys on the other. The red banners, red flags, red caps and the sheer numbers really startled the media. The video went viral in the social media and after that we started getting a lot of coverage in the mainstream print and electronic media right up to the culmination of the Long March.

SENSITIVE AND HUMANITARIAN DECISION

The Kisan Sabha leadership took the sensitive and humanitarian decision of walking day and night on the last day, from 11 am on March 11 when the march started from Thane city to 6 am on March 12 when it reached Azad Maidan in the heart of south Mumbai. This decision was taken to avoid the inevitable traffic snarls on March 12 that would surely have disrupted the final board examinations of tens of thousands of SSC students in Mumbai and would have led to the loss of a precious year in their lives. Tens of thousands of peasants took this decision democratically, at the suggestion placed by J P Gavit, by a massive and unanimous show of hands on the night of March 11 when they reached the Somaiya Maidan at Sion in Mumbai city. Their noble sentiments were expressed in these memorable words, 'It does not matter if we have to suffer some more, but we will not let our children in Mumbai suffer.' They had their dinner, rested for an hour or two, and restarted their march to Mumbai after midnight, reaching their destination at dawn. This gesture drew the unstinted admiration

of people not only in Mumbai, but all across the country. Several prominent celebrities in India also expressed their appreciation at this gesture.

GOVERNMENT CONCEDES

All this put tremendous pressure on the BJP-led state government. Actually, the state government had not bothered to make any contact with the marchers till March 11, the penultimate day of the march, when their state Irrigation Minister Girish Mahajan met the leaders during the march itself and the memorandum of demands was handed over to him. Initially, before the march began, they had almost certainly underestimated its likely size. Later, the massive response to the Long March of the peasantry, the people and the media, which they had least expected, shocked them into taking action.

On March 12, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, Ministers Chandrakant Patil, Girish Mahajan, Eknath Shinde, Pandurang Fundkar, Subhash Deshmukh and Vishnu Savra, along with a battery of top officials of various departments, held a three-hour discussion with Kisan Sabha leaders in the Vidhan Bhavan. Also present were leaders of the opposition Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil (Congress), Dhananjay Munde, Ajit Pawar and Sunil Tatkare (NCP).

General secretary of the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) Jayant Patil, MLC, who had helped the Kisan Sabha struggle all along, and state president of the Janata Dal (Sharad Yadav group), Kapil Patil, MLC, were also present during the discussions.

The Kisan Sabha delegation included Dr Ashok Dhawale, J.P. Gavit, MLA, CITU former state president Narasayya Adam, ex-MLA, Kisan Gujar, Dr Ajit Nawale, Subhash Choudhari, Savliram Pawar, Sunil Malusare, Irfan Shaikh, Ratan Budhar, Barkya Mangat, Radka Kalangda, Umesh Deshmukh, Sidhappa Kalshetty, Vilas Babar and DYFI state vice president Indrajeet Gavit. These

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were AIKS state office bearers who actually walked in the Long March, along with AIAWU state leader Manohar Muley and CITU state leader Vinod Nikole.

In the light of the earlier bitter experiences with the present government, the Kisan Sabha had taken the clear position right in the beginning that it would not withdraw this struggle without official written assurances. These written assurances on all the demands were given within an hour of the conclusion of the talks, with the signature of the chief secretary of the state government. Three Ministers of the state government – Chandrakant Patil and Girish Mahajan of the BJP and Eknath Shinde of the Shiv Sena – came on their own to the victory rally at Azad Maidan and pledged to implement the agreement that had been reached. The Kisan Sabha also insisted that the agreement arrived at should be placed on the table of the House by the chief minister in the state assembly that was then in session. Accordingly, the chief minister tabled that agreement in the House on March 13.

Concrete time-bound written assurances have been given by the government on AIKS demands concerning the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), river linking proposal adversely affecting tribals in Nashik, Palghar and Thane districts, loan waiver to farmers, mechanism for remunerative prices, vesting of temple lands, regularising houses on pasture lands, no land acquisition without consent, increase in old-age pensions, improving the public distribution system and compensation to lakhs of farmers in the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions who have suffered huge losses of the cotton crop due to pink bollworm pest attacks, hailstorms and other issues. The agreement reached on March 12 between the Government of Maharashtra and the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha has been published in the CPI(M) central Party papers *People's Democracy* and *Loklahar*.

RESOUNDING VICTORY RALLY

The resounding AIKS victory rally of over 50,000 farmers at Azad Maidan in Mumbai on the evening of March 12 was addressed by CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, ex-MP, CPI(M) state secretary Narasayya Adam, ex-MLA, PWP general secretary Jayant Patil, MLC, Janata Dal (Sharad Yadav group) state president Kapil Patil, MLC, former AIKS president Amra Ram, ex-MLA, AIKS joint secretaries K K Ragesh, MP, and Vijoo Krishnan (who had taken part in the first two days of the march), renowned journalist P Sainath, CPI(M) central committee member Mahendra Singh, AIDWA general secretary Mariam Dhawale and vice president Sudha Sundararaman, CITU vice president Dr D.L. Karad, and by leaders of this Long March – AIKS national president Dr Ashok Dhawale, former state president J.P. Gavit, MLA, state president Kisan Gujar and state general secretary Dr Ajit Nawale – and, earlier in the day by other leaders of AIKS, CITU, AIAWU, AIDWA, DYFI, SFI and by a wide spectrum of the supporting political parties, organisations and individuals.

All the farmers left Mumbai on the night of March 12, with tremendous confidence generated by this victory, buttressed with deep gratitude towards the people of the city, the state and the country who had supported them to the hilt in this struggle. The massive nationwide public response to this Long March was a tribute to the valiant, peaceful, democratic and unprecedented struggle waged by tens of thousands of peasants under the collective leadership of the Maharashtra Rajya Kisan Sabha.

A BATTLE WON, THE WAR REMAINS

This massive response was also a reflection of the fact that the demands of land rights, loan waiver, remunerative prices and pension, which were essentially directed against the neoliberal policies of the BJP-led governments in the state and at the centre,

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were in fact the demands of the peasantry of India as a whole. The Long March was an integral part of a movement of farmers that is breaking out all over the country.

Now the AIKS Central Kisan Committee has decided to broaden and intensify this struggle all over the country. We have decided on an unprecedented campaign of collecting 10 crore signatures of farmers and all citizens across India to demand a loan waiver, remunerative prices, land rights, pension and comprehensive crop insurance. On 9th August, 2018, the 76th anniversary of the Quit India Movement, lakhs of farmers in the country will submit these signatures to every District Collector and will then conduct a peaceful and democratic countrywide Jail Bharo (Fill up Jails) agitation on these demands. The slogan will be: Just as Mahatma Gandhi told the rapacious British imperialists to Quit India, so also the farmers of the country will tell the anti-farmer, pro-corporate, communal, casteist and divisive Modi-led BJP government to Quit India!

One more major decision taken is to organise a massive countrywide Mazdoor-Kisan Rally in Delhi on September 5, 2018, jointly by CITU, AIKS and AIAWU. It is an important step towards worker-peasant unity.

Another crucial gain of this Long March was that the peasantry struggled together as a class, rising above the divisions of religion, caste and creed. The massive peoples' solidarity with it also cut across all these barriers. It showed that, in the last analysis, class struggle and class solidarity is the only way to fight back the dark forces of communalism and casteism.

One battle has been won, but the war still remains. And after the victory in this battle, this war shall be fought with even greater grit and determination all over the country!