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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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21.12.2019

Tens of thousands defy Indian government threats and demonstrate against Hindu-supremacist laws

India's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government has stepped up its state repression of workers and youth opposing its communalist Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

The reactionary legislation, which was rammed through national parliament by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, grants Indian citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan but denies that right to Muslims from any country in South Asia. Immigrants from other countries in the region, including Tamils from Sri Lanka and Rohingya from Myanmar, are also excluded.

At the same time the government has extended its National Register of Citizens (NRC), already imposed in the northeastern state of Assam, to all other Indian states. Under the NRC, people must provide documentary evidence to authorities to "prove" they are citizens of India.

The CAA and NRC laws threaten India's 200 million Muslim residents with being declared "non-citizens" and possible expulsion.

The Modi government has responded to an eruption of mass protests, involving tens of thousands of people from across all ethnic and religious groups, with increased police brutality and state repression. Defying these threats, huge demonstrations and marches were held in Kolkata, capital of West Bengal, for the third consecutive day on Wednesday. Yesterday, BJP state governments imposed section 144 of the Indian Criminal Code across Uttar Pradesh, and in Bengaluru and Mangaluru in Karnataka state. The imposition

of this repressive British colonial law, which prohibits gatherings of more than four people, is an attempt to criminalise all opposition to the CAA and NRC.

On Wednesday armed Delhi police and paramilitary personnel held a “flag march” or show of force demonstration in an attempt to intimidate and suppress protests in the city’s Seelampur and Jafrabad areas. Eight people were arrested. Article 144 measures were also imposed at Red Fort and in the city’s northeast.

Yesterday, the police detained several protesters near Red Fort prior to a scheduled demonstration organised by the Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and its so-called Left Front. Police had previously denied permission for the planned march.

Police also banned a scheduled protest march in Bengaluru. Acclaimed historian Ramchandra Guha was dragged away by the police outside the Town Hall as he explained to the media why he opposed the BJP’s Hindu-supremacist laws and the state repression.

“The police are working under directions from central government. We are protesting non-violently against a discriminatory act, in a disciplined way... Have you seen any violence?” Guha said, as he and scores of others were forced onto a bus and taken to the police station.

Government authorities imposed a curfew in five police areas in Mangaluru, also in Karnataka state, and suspended internet access in the city. On Thursday, two people were killed in the city after security forces opened fire on demonstrators allegedly trying to set fire to a police station. Another man was killed in Lucknow, the Uttar Pradesh state capital, during violent clashes between demonstrators and police. Over 110 people were reportedly detained by police.

A massive anti-CAA protest was also held in Uttar Pradesh’s Braj region. Police attacked the demonstration and arrested 38 people, most of whom were released later on personal bonds. The president and secretary of the Agra-based Sarvdaleey Muslim Action Committee in Uttar Pradesh, which organised the protest, were kept in custody. Five students were arrested in Agra when they attempted to hold a demonstration inside BR Ambedkar University.

Students at major universities across India are widely involved in the protests. These demonstrations have intensified following the brutal police attacks at Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI) university in Delhi and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) in Uttar Pradesh on Sunday.

Police illegally entered both universities, arresting and assaulting students, some seriously injured. Protests quickly erupted at several universities across India denouncing the violent attacks on JMI and AMU students.

On Wednesday, Jamia Teachers' Association (JTA) members held a march to thank university students across the country for supporting the JMI students and categorically rejecting the CAA and NRC.

“We don't want another partition,” the JTA declared. The organisation has established a committee to investigate “police brutality.” It has demanded the withdrawal of all police charges against JMI students and adequate compensation for all property damaged in the police assault.

Senior Uttar Pradesh police claim that officers did not enter hostels inside the AMU, but CCTV footage clearly shows police raiding hostels, assaulting students and damaging property.

A fact-finding team of lawyers has revealed that police and Rapid Action Force (RAF) officers attacked students with tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades, while entering hostels and mosques and vandalising students' vehicles. Around 60 students were injured, three seriously. Many students are missing and are believed to be arrested and detained.

India's discriminatory CAA and NRC measures are part of the BJP's reactionary agenda to weaken and divide the working class along communal lines. Fearful of the growing opposition of the Indian working class and rural toilers to austerity policies and pro-investor “reforms,” the BJP is attempting to mobilise extreme-right Hindu elements and use them as shock troops against the working class.

At the same time, Congress and the Indian Stalinist parties are attempting to divert the mass opposition to the CAA laws into harmless appeals to the government and the Indian ruling elite.

The Congress party, having faced a series of electoral debacles at the hands of the BJP, is now attempting to posture as a “secular” opposition to the Hindu supremacists and boost its future electoral fortunes.

Congress's opposition to CAA and NRC is a fraud however. The NRC in Assam, which makes almost two million people living there “stateless,” follows the Assam Accord signed in August 1985 by the then Congress government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi with Assam Movement.

Congress has a long record of collaborating with the Hindu communalists, from 1947, when it agreed to the partition of then British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India, through to its recent formation of a government with the fascistic Shiv Sena in the western state of Maharashtra.

The most treacherous political role in diverting the mass demonstrations against the CAA and the NRC is being played by Stalinists—the CPM and Communist Party of India (CPI), and their Left Front.

The Stalinists have seized on Modi's Hindu supremacist moves to step up their efforts to politically subordinate the working class to Congress and various reactionary caste-based regional bourgeois parties, claiming they represent a “secular” bulwark against the BJP. The Stalinists are currently holding joint anti-CAA demonstrations with Congress in Delhi, Kerala and West Bengal.

Other parties and organisations are attempting to divert the opposition to CAA by promoting reactionary anti-immigrant sentiments. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal from the Aam Admi Party, for example, has denounced the CAA from the right, claiming immigration from neighbouring countries will stop Indians from getting jobs. Likewise the All Assam Students Association, which is organising anti-CAA protests in Assam, opposes granting citizenship to all immigrants from the Indian sub-continent.

20 December 2019