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Support widens for Bharat Bandh call

Opposition leaders seek repeal of laws; farmers say transport unions, industry bodies back shutdown

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Top Opposition leaders, in a joint statement on Sunday, extended their support to the December 8 Bharat Bandh called by farmers' organisations demanding a rollback of the three farm sector laws, and claimed that the new laws would "destroy Indian agriculture by mortgaging it to corporates".

The joint statement was signed by Congress president Sonia Gandhi, NCP chief Sharad Pawar, National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah, DMK president M.K. Stalin, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, CPI general secretary D. Raja, RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav and CPI(ML) general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya, among others.

Leaders of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha claimed that support for the bandh had poured in from transport unions, women's and students' organisations and federations of industry, apart from political parties.



Gaining strength: Bharatiya Kisan Union spokesperson Rakesh Tikait and supporters taking part in a demonstration at the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border in Ghazipur on Sunday. ■ R.V. MOORTHY

Separately, the Telangana Rashtra Samiti and the Shiv Sena too backed the call given by the farmers

Asking the Centre to meet the "legitimate" demands of the *kisan-annadatas*, the Opposition statement said, "We the undersigned leaders of political parties extend our solidarity with the ongoing massive struggle by the

Indian farmers organised by various kisan organisations from across the country and extend our support to their call for a Bharat Bandh on December 8 demanding the withdrawal of these retrograde Agri-laws and the Elec-

tricity Amendment Bill." "These new Agri-Laws passed in Parliament in a brazen anti-democratic manner, threaten India's food security, destroy Indian agriculture and our farmers, lay the basis for the abolishment of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and mortgage Indian agriculture and our markets to the caprices of multi-national agri-business corporates and domestic corporates," added the joint statement that was released by the CPI (M).

The Bharat Bandh would be "complete" as all businesses, shops and commercial establishments would remain shut from morning till evening, said All-India Kisan Sabha (Ajoy Bhavan) general secretary (Punjab) Baldev Singh Nihalgarh.

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Addressing a press briefing at Singhu (Delhi-Haryana border), he said the supply of vegetables, fruits and milk would be stopped during the bandh, but emergency services and wedding processions would be allowed.

The *chakka jam*, or road blockade, would end at 3 p.m, he added.

Mr. Singh said the farmers' unions were forced to intensify their stir since the Centre did not appear to take their demands seriously.

In a growing trend, Olympian boxer and Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna awardee Vijender Singh visited the Singhu border to extend support to the farmers and announced that he would return the

award if the farmers' demands were not met.

Swaraj India national president Yogendra Yadav also announced that all *mandis* in Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan would remain shut on December 8 and claimed that industry groups from Uttarakhand and Haryana had also pledged their support.

Welcoming a statement from the Editors' Guild of India, Mr. Yadav appealed to the media for "fair" reporting of the movement without attempts to defame it.

"We make an appeal to all to shun their flags and take part in the protests as farmers," said Mr. Yadav at the Singhu border and added that it has now become a "national movement".