National Alliance of People’s Movements strongly condemns the unlawful persecution and arrests of pro-people activists Shoma Sen, Advocate Surender Gadling, Sudhir Dhawale, Rona Wilson, and Mahesh Raut by the Maharashtra Police and demand for their immediate and unconditional release.

New Delhi, June 8, 2018: At around 6 am on the 6th of June, Professor Shoma Sen – Head of the English Department in Nagpur University and a long time Dalit and women’s rights activist, Advocate Surendra Gadling - General Secretary of the Indian Association of Peoples’ Lawyers (IAPL), who has been relentlessly fighting cases of human rights violations, Sudhir Dhawale - editor of the Marathi magazine Vidrohi and founder of the Republican Panther – Caste Annihilation Movement, Rona Wilson – human rights activist and Secretary of Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners (CRPP) and Mahesh Raut - anti-displacement activist working with Gram Sabhas in the mining areas of Gadchiroli and a former Prime Minister’s Rural Development Fellow – had their houses raided and were arrested from different locations in Nagpur, Bombay, and Delhi by the Maharashtra police. This was reportedly in connection with the Bhima-Koregaon agitation that took place in January 2018.

Mahesh Raut has been fighting alongside local communities against State and corporate land grab, and the resultant exploitation of indigenous communities and natural resources. Adv. Gadling has been fighting out these battles in the court room and representing many Dalits and adivasis accused and arrested under false charges and draconian laws. He is also a legal counsel in the case of Dr. G.N. Saibaba, a Delhi University professor with 90% disabilities, who has been accused of having Maoist links. Similarly, Shoma Sen has been intensely involved in various human rights campaigns against State repression and has regularly raised her voice to bring out true stories from the ground, both in her role as an academic and an activist. Sudhir Dhawale is a well-known Dalit rights activist and writer who was arrested in 2011 under the UAPA but was acquitted in 2014 due to lack of evidence. Rona Wilson is a long-time activist and strong critic of draconian laws such as AFSPA, POTA, and UAPA. Bhima Koregaon is an excuse to prevent these activists from carrying on their work for justice, against oppression and against loot of natural resources in tribal areas.

In April, these activists had their houses raided; electronic equipments and documents seized by the Maharashtra Police, who also raided the homes of Kabir Kala Manch cultural activists Rupali Jadhav, Jyoti Jagtap, Ramesh Gaichor, Sagar Gorkhe,
Dhawala Dhengale and Republican Panther activist Harshali Potdar. The initial FIR at Vishrambaug Police Station, Pune, named Sudhir and other KKM members. FIRs had also been filed against Dalit activist and MLA Jignesh Mevani from Gujarat and student activist Umar Khalid who had been invited to speak at the Bhima Koregaon celebrations. Later, the prosecution made an appeal to add the names of Surendra Gadling and Rona Wilson to the chargesheet. The names of Mahesh Raut and Shoma Sen were never mentioned in court papers. The recent arrests of these activists in the context of the Bhima Koregaon agitation is suspicious as some of those arrested weren’t involved in the celebrations or the agitation that followed. However, when seen in the context of today’s regime, it reeks of a well-planned, desperate move by the government to remove all voices that stand to challenge or critique it, like it has been doing all along - in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, the North East, and elsewhere.

This attack on activists is nothing new under this regime. Rational thinkers like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M. M. Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh were brutally murdered by members of right wing Hindutva groups in broad daylight. Common citizens like Junaid, Akhlakh and Pehlu Khan are being lynched. Trade unions like the MSS (Mazdoor Sangathan Samiti) in Jharkhand are being banned and several rights-based groups and individuals are being blacklisted, having their bank accounts frozen or are being accused in false cases. People’s leaders like Chandrashekha Azad ‘Raavan’ of Uttar Pradesh and Bacha Singh of Jharkhand, journalists like Teesta Setalvad, professors like Dr. G.N. Saibaba, student activists, cartoonists and democratic voices are being booked and branded under draconian laws. Media trials, a culture of fake news and social media persecution are being used to poison public sentiments against those who are daring to speak truth to power and to instil fear in the hearts of the rest. There is blatant lawlessness as those vested with the power of maintaining law and order, and justice are turning into the biggest abusers thereof. The murder of citizens protesting the Sterlite copper factory by the police forces in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu or the fake encounter killings of 40 alleged ‘Maoists’ in Gadchiroli recently, many of who were minors and local adivasis, are only among the latest in a series of such violations – a chilling reminder of how it is not some alleged underground organisation but the very State in which people have vested their power and good faith that is openly threatening democracy.

WE CONDEMN:

1) This clampdown by the Maharashtra Government on Dalit assertions.
2) The continuous brutal and violent suppression of dissenting voices and defenders of
most marginalised groups in the name of curbing anti-national threats and Naxal terror.
3) The blatant abuse of power by the State using draconian laws like UAPA, AFSPA, and POTA as weapons to silence people protesting the anti-people agenda of the Government of Maharashtra and Government of India.
4) The free reign given to vigilante groups to protect and promote the idea of a Hindu Nation, by a State that claims to be secular and democratic.
5) The media trials and building of false narratives along with judicial delays and irregularities leading to poisoning of public opinion around those arrested.

WE DEMAND:

- The immediate and unconditional release of Professor Shoma Sen, Advocate Surendra Gadling, Sudhir Dhawale, Rona Wilson, Mahesh Raut and other political prisoners of the Indian State.
- A high-level investigation into the widespread violence organized against Dalit communities in the aftermath of the Bhima-Koregaon commemoration.
- The immediate and complete strikedown of UAPA and all draconian laws including AFSPA, and POTA used to terrorize people across the country and give unchecked power to the police and the military.
- An end to the vindictive harassment and state repression of all those activists and intellectuals who organized or spoke at the Bhima Koregaon bicentennial celebration.
- Immediate arrest of Sambhaji Bhide on serious charges of rioting, attempt to murder and under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, and cancellation of bail of Milind Ekbote.

Medha Patkar, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM)

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Sister Celia, Domestic Workers Union; Maj Gen (Retd) S.G. Vombatkere, NAPM, Karnataka

Anand Mazgaonkar, Swati Desai, Krishnakant, Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti, NAPM Gujarat

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Dayamani Barla, Adivasi-MoolnivasiAstiBasant Kumar Hetamsaria and Ashok Verma, NAPM Jharkhand

Samar Bagchi, Amitava Mitra, NAPM West Bengal

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Bhupender Singh Rawat, Jan SangharshVahini; Sunita Rani, Domestic Workers Union; Rajendra Ravi, Nanhu Prasad, Madhuresh Kumar, Amit Kumar, Himshi Singh, Uma, NAPM, Delhi

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