

Stalinism and the rise of the Hindu-chauvinist BJP

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26 May 1998

The political fallout from the Indian government's detonation of five nuclear devices underscores the urgency of Indian workers adopting a new perspective to counter the Hindu-chauvinist BJP and the Indian bourgeoisie's "new economic policy," which subjects India's human and natural resources to ever-more direct and rapacious imperialist exploitation.

With some success, the BJP has used the nuclear tests and the consequent confrontation with the U.S. to incite jingoism, don an "anti-imperialist" garb, and strengthen its hitherto shaky grasp on power. According to *Frontline*, a newsmagazine that is a staunch critic of the BJP and the current government, "To say that the aftermath of the test was euphoric would be a considerable understatement."

One of the BJP's objectives is to whip up support for the military, so that it can mount more vigorous counter-insurgency operations against the Pakistani-backed secessionist movement in Kashmir and separatist movements in India's north-east.

But the BJP's militarism and anti-Pakistan rhetoric are principally directed against the working class and other opponents of its right-wing agenda. Confrontation with Pakistan is an elaborate, although potentially bloody, spectacle that serves to channel social tensions against an external "enemy" and divert attention from unpopular socio-economic policies. Moreover, by projecting itself as the defender of the nation, the BJP hopes to be able to paint all opposition to its regime as "anti-national." Already, BJP spokesmen are accusing the Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, of "misplaced loyalties" for not joining the rest of India's political establishment in hailing the nuclear tests.

The conflict that has erupted with the Clinton administration has enabled the BJP to tap into popular anti-imperialist sentiment, the better to obscure the historical record of the Hindu chauvinists. Under British-rule, the principal Hindu communalist organizations, the All-India Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) opposed the Congress-led mass mobilizations for fear that the British would respond by showering favors on the Muslim political elite. In the decades following independence, the RSS and the BJP's predecessor, the Jana Sangh, pressed for better relations with Washington and Wall Street.

While basking in its new-found anti-US posture, the BJP-led government has in fact taken a spate of decisions over the past two weeks aimed at placating foreign investors, including handing out oil exploration blocks and mineral leases and providing additional guarantees to power project developers. According to press reports, the budget that the BJP-led government will deliver less than two weeks from now will gut subsidies for fuel and fertilizer and step up the privatization of public sector enterprises.

The Indian ruling class, for its part, is urging the Vajpayee government to use its new-found popularity to intensify the assault on the working class and oppressed masses. "If a nuclear weapon has long been part of the BJP's agenda," declared an editorial in the May 25 issue of *India*

Today, "so has an economy which exemplifies the spirit of free enterprise. It is now time to make this second promise a reality as well. True, this calls for some tough decisions — but the Government cannot seek a better cushion than the prevalent mood...."

"India's vulnerabilities are well known: excessive bureaucratic control, an irrational revenue structure, too few people paying too large a share of the taxes, wasteful subsidies, a money-guzzling public sector, and so on. To take care of any of these would be to anger entrenched lobbies and court public anger. This is why successive governments have only tinkered with the problem. Given his post-Pokhran [i.e. post-nuclear test] good will, Vajpayee now has a chance to do better. He may not get another opportunity. Sadly, nor may India."

The Indian bourgeoisie is not oblivious to the danger that the BJP's militarism could draw India into foreign policy adventures and that its Hindu chauvinism — its battle-cry of "one people, one culture, one nation" — could provoke social unrest that would further undermine the Indian state.

But with its traditional political instrument, the Congress Party, having lost its mass base and the Indian political system having fractured into a myriad of regionalist and caste-based parties, important sections of Indian capital calculate that the BJP is, at present, the best-positioned to form a strong government capable of pressing forward with privatization, deregulation, the cutting of social spending, price-controls and subsidies and the scrapping of land ceilings. Not only does the BJP's Hindu chauvinist ideology provide it with a measure of unity and discipline lacking in many of the other bourgeois formations; its close ties to the RSS — a centralized, mass-based "volunteer" organization that promotes martial training and has long-been associated with communal violence — means that it has at its disposal a shock force for use against a movement of the working class.

The removal of all restrictions on the exploitation of the subcontinent by the transnationals will spell ruin for tens of millions of workers, peasants, agricultural laborers, artisans and small traders. The pivotal question is what perspective will animate the inevitable opposition movement.

The role of the Stalinist parties

That the Hindu-chauvinist BJP has been able, even if only temporarily, to exploit anti-imperialist sentiments must be cause for sober reflection. Above all it is necessary that Indian workers critically appraise the role of Stalinism.

The CPI and CPI (M) have for decades maintained that imperialist oppression binds together the antagonistic social classes that comprise Indian society and that the working class must support the "progressive" or "anti-imperialist" sections of the national bourgeoisie.

The latest consequence of this perspective was the issuing of a statement by the Politbureau of the CPI (M) calling “all sections of the people” to “unitedly reject any intimidatory tactics directed against India” — in effect for unity with the BJP government. Previously, the CPs supported the Congress “national project,” which sought to secure the position of the national bourgeoisie through high tariffs and import substitution. In the case of the CPI, this support included endorsing the imposition of martial law by Indira Gandhi during the 1975-77 “Emergency”.

Imperialist oppression does not weld the classes of India together, rather it exacerbates the conflict between them. After a half-century of independent bourgeois rule, India is marked by enormous and ever-widening social inequality, with capitalist exploitation interwoven with caste oppression, bonded labor and other vestiges of feudalism. Similarly, Indian nationalism does not reflect a common opposition to imperialism that transcends class divisions. It is the ideology of the national bourgeoisie.

Millions of Indian workers and peasants fought against British rule for they recognized it was the apex of a system of exploitation and viewed independence as a means toward realizing their democratic and social demands. Even today the anti-imperialist sentiments of the masses may find distorted expression through nationalism. But Indian nationalism has historically served to bind the working class and oppressed masses to the leadership of the bourgeoisie. It obscures the real nature of the historical antagonism between the Indian bourgeoisie and imperialism, that what the national bourgeoisie seeks is merely greater freedom to exploit the Indian masses.

If the BJP has been able to exploit Indian nationalism, it is largely because the CPs, schooled in the nationalist-Stalinist perversion of Marxism, have promoted the idea that Indian nationalism is a non-class ideology and argued that because the tasks of the democratic revolution are yet to be completed, the struggle for socialism and the independent political struggle of the working class are not yet on the historical agenda.

The bitter history of India in the twentieth century proves the exact opposite. While the Stalinists uphold the Indian Republic as a bulwark against imperialism, its establishment represented not the realization, but the betrayal of the anti-imperialist movement that convulsed India in the first half of the twentieth century. Anxious to get its hands on the reins of power and terrified by the post-World War upsurge of the working class and oppressed masses, the Indian bourgeoisie accepted a settlement with British imperialism in 1947 under which the subcontinent was divided along communal lines and the most burning tasks of the democratic revolution — national unification and the eradication of landlordism and caste oppression — were aborted.

Born of the betrayal of the democratic aspirations of the masses, the Indian capitalist state, no less than the other states founded in South Asia in 1947-48, has served as an incubator for chauvinism and communalism. It is one thing to oppose the BJP’s efforts to staff the state with RSS cadres and oppose all attempts to roll back democratic rights; it is quite another to maintain, as have the Stalinist parties, that communalism can be fought through the “secular” Indian state, alliances with all manner of regionalist, caste-based and outright gangster-politicians, and anti-democratic constitutional provisions like Presidential Rule.

Over the past decade, the Stalinist parties have moved still further to the right. They have embraced the bourgeoisie’s “new economic policy” and joined in the rewriting of government policy to placate foreign capital both at the Center, where they were the principal ideologues and strategists of the United Front government, and in the states where they form the government — West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

The BJP is a serious menace to the working class and oppressed masses. But if the bourgeoisie directly uses it to intimidate the working class, the Stalinist trade union, party and state functionaries use it indirectly — telling workers that to counter the extreme right they must support all manner of

bourgeois parties and accept the reorganization of India’s economy under the auspices of Indian and international capital.

The counting of the votes in elections last March for the 12th Lok Sabha [parliament] had scarcely begun when CPI (M) General Secretary Harkishen Surjeet announced that his party was ready to support a Congress government led by Sonia Gandhi. To the Stalinists’ chagrin, the Congress Party chose not to try to form the government. Reflecting the present calculations of the bourgeoisie, it instead opted to offer “constructive support” to the BJP-led coalition, while standing in wait to provide the bourgeoisie with an alternative regime should the BJP falter.

As for the Stalinists’ erstwhile allies in the United Front, they have been, if anything, even more fulsome than the Congress in their praise of the BJP government’s nuclear policy. As one journalist observed, “The non-Left parties of the United Front have actually been ahead of the Congress in backing the nuclear forward policy, with ex-Prime Minister Gujral zealously claiming for himself and his government a significant part of the credit for the explosions ...”

The Stalinists claim that communalism must be defeated before any struggle against the national bourgeoisie’s “new economic policy” can be undertaken. In fact, the two are inseparable. The more the national bourgeoisie functions in direct partnership with imperialism, the more it must seek to use communalism, caste-politics and chauvinism to divert the opposition of the masses.

The fight against communalism and militarism is inseparable from the raising of a program to unite the workers and oppressed of all religions and national-ethnic groups — that is an anti-capitalist program founded on the principle of social equality. The Socialist Labour League, the Indian organization in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights for the working class to break from the parties of the bourgeoisie and place itself at the leadership of the growing opposition to India’s subordination to the dictates of international capital.

Genuine freedom from imperialism and genuine democracy, including the liquidation of caste oppression and landlordism and the democratic unification of the peoples of South Asia, can only be achieved in struggle against the national bourgeoisie and through the establishment of a workers and peasants government in alliance with the socialist struggle of the international working class. The true ally of the Indian masses in the struggle against imperialism is not, as the Stalinists have claimed, the national bourgeoisie, but rather the international working class.

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