

Stalinist parties in India pledge to support Congress power bid

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India's two main Stalinist parties--the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M)--used their recently concluded party congresses to voice their support for the return to power of the Indian bourgeoisie's oldest and traditional governing party, the Congress.

The CPI (M)'s 16th party congress, which was held in Calcutta October 5-11, offered 'issue-based support' to a Congress-led government. But party spokesmen made clear that should the Congress succeed in ousting India's Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government, the Stalinists will work to ensure a Congress coalition remains in power until the current parliament, which was elected only last March, has served a regular, four- or five-year, term.

The CPI(M)'s last congress, held in Chandigarh in 1996, had adopted a main policy resolution calling for 'equidistance from both the bourgeois enemies, the Congress and the BJP'. Since then, however, the United Front, a coalition between the Stalinist-led Left Front and several regional parties, has fallen from power and collapsed in all but name.

Thanks to parliamentary support from the Congress, the UF was able to form India's government for two years, but in the recent elections it lost almost half its seats. The principal reason for this sharp reversal was that the UF, notwithstanding the 'pro-people' rhetoric of the Stalinists, pressed forward with the 'liberalisation' policies of its Congress predecessor--slashing public sector jobs, price supports and social spending.

The CPI(M)'s 1998 congress resolution justified the new line of support for the Congress by stating that the party 'central task' is the 'struggle against the communal forces'--the Hindu-chauvinist BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh--and that this requires a 'broad-based mobilisation,' including efforts to reach out to the 'secular base' of the Congress.

At the opening of the CPI(M) congress, party spokesmen were still trying to maintain some distance from the

Congress, saying that they would provide parliamentary backing to a Congress-led coalition, if the BJP-led coalition fell apart. But by week's end, the Stalinists were urging the Congress to spare no effort to split the BJP coalition and make an immediate bid for power. As for the Congress's right-wing socio-economic program, CPI(M) Politbureau member and West Bengal Premier Jyoti Basu urged the Congress to subject them to 'sincere introspection.'

The CPI, the smaller and traditionally more pro-Congress of the two Stalinist parties, took a similar line at its 17th national congress, which was held in Madras September 14-18. It too promised 'issue-based support' to the party led by Sonia Gandhi, widow of Rajiv and daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi.

In so far as there was any opposition within the leadership of either Stalinist party to the pro-Congress line, it was from the standpoint of provincial electoral concerns. In the three states where the Left Front holds office--West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura--the Congress is the Stalinist parties' main electoral rival.

Cold reaction from the Congress

To the disappointment of the Stalinist leaders, the Congress has reacted coldly to their offer of support. Although on October 6 Congress spokesperson Girija Vyas said the CPI(M)'s offer was 'a good development,' other senior Congress leaders, apparently at Sonia Gandhi's bequest, soon ruled out any prospect of their party accepting the support of the Stalinist-led 'Left Front' to form a government at the centre. Leaders of the Congress state unit in West Bengal, the most important state in which the Left Front forms the government, were particularly vocal in opposing any truck with the CPI(M).

Rajesh Pilot of the Congress Working Committee flatly ruled out any immediate attempt to displace the BJP government: 'We are in no position either to form a government or to topple the present government unless a major ally of the BJP withdraws support.' In fact the largest

BJP 'ally,' the Tamil nationalist AIDMK, has repeatedly signalled its readiness to switch camps. If the Congress has yet to act on this offer, it is not simply because it does not want to become beholden to the AIDMK's mercurial leader, Ms. J. Jayalalitha.

Many Congress leaders fear, because of the parliamentary arithmetic and the conflicting interests of its potential regional allies, a Congress-led government would be ineffectual and no longer-lived than its BJP predecessor, thus gravely undermining their efforts to rebuild the Congress's shattered base.

The most conscious sections of the Indian bourgeoisie have welcomed the Stalinists' new line. They recognise that support from the purported parties of the working class and oppressed masses for the Congress will greatly facilitate their efforts to tart up the corrupt Congress machine and recycle it as an alternative government-in-waiting to the BJP, whose right-wing socio-economic and communal policies may yet provoke mass opposition. In an editorial October 9 *The Hindu* declared: 'The New Line adopted by the CPI(M) indicating a willingness to reach out to the Congress(I) in the context of the 'struggle against the BJP-RSS combine of the communal forces' is clearly a recognition by the party of the prevailing reality on the ground.'

How has the BJP emerged as India's largest party?

At neither congress was it possible for the Stalinist leaders to totally ignore the critical question: how it is that the Hindu-chauvinist BJP, not the Left Front, has been the principal beneficiary of the erosion of the Congress's popular support? 'The Communists,' declared CPI(M) General Secretary Harkishen Surjeet, 'made big sacrifices for independence. Why couldn't we make a change in the country after more than half a century of struggles and activities carried out by us? After the fall of the Congress party, how did the BJP exploit the discontent of the masses and come to power?' But the answers the Stalinist leaders provided were a combination of evasions, sophistries and downright lies. The Stalinists' erstwhile allies were denounced for having foisted a right-wing agenda on the UF government, then 'betraying' secularism--as if anything else could be expected from these right-wing, caste-based parties of the regional bourgeoisie.

The truth is that it is the Stalinist parties that have fed the rise of the communal right by subordinating the working class for decades to the bourgeois Congress and later to various other regional bourgeois parties. Having cleared the path for the BJP, the Stalinists now try to intimidate the working class by pointing to the BJP's chauvinism and its fascistic RSS allies. To counter the BJP, they argue that the

masses must further curtail their struggles so as to support the return to power of the Congress, i.e., an intensification of the very same course that has paved the way for the rise of the BJP.

In the past, the Stalinists justified their backing to the Congress by citing its nationalist economic program as proof of its 'anti-imperialism.' Today, when the Congress has abandoned its past nationalist program and has thrown India open to unfettered exploitation by the transnationals, they claim the Congress is the last bulwark against communalism!

The Stalinists have themselves been complicit in the implementation of India's 'new economic policy', not only through their participation in the UF but by actively courting international capital in their guise as state ministers in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

Their common stand in support of a Congress government has brought the two CPs closer to a much talked about reunification. Ironically, their respective attitude towards the Congress was long a bitter bone of contention between the two wings of Indian Stalinism. In the 1970s, the CPI supported Indira Gandhi's government even during the Emergency, when it used a form of martial law to quell worker and peasant opposition. The CPI(M), meanwhile, was making common cause with the Janata Party, which brought together disparate capitalist opposition parties, including the Jana Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP.

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