

Indian "left" forms an unholy alliance with fascistic Shiv Sena

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A one-day general strike or *bandh* that paralysed the Indian commercial and industrial city of Bombay on April 25 raises important political issues for the working class.

The strike certainly reflected the widespread anger of workers and others over job losses, rising levels of unemployment and poverty, and the growing gulf between rich and poor. According to the trade unions, some 20 million people took part in the protest bringing most transport to a halt and shutting many offices and factories in Bombay and elsewhere in the state of Maharashtra. According to P.N. Mogre, Secretary-General of the Indian Merchant Chamber, "There will be a loss of four billion rupees (\$US85.4 million) in Bombay alone."

At the same time, however, the strike provided a particularly graphic example of the unholy alliance that is developing internationally between the so-called left and organisations of the extreme rightwing in the name of combatting "globalisation". In Bombay, the organisation of the *bandh* embraced not only the so-called Communist parties—the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI (M)) and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—but the fascistic, Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena which espouses a combination of virulent Hindu communalism and Marathi chauvinism. Marathi is the main language in the state of Maharashtra.

The CPI (M), CPI and their affiliated trade unions called the strike about a month ago following the national budget brought down by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in late February. The protest was organised to oppose the privatisation of state-owned enterprises as well as proposed changes to labour laws that will allow companies employing up to 1,000 workers to retrench their workforce without government approval. These measures were passed in the lower house of the parliament on the day of the *bandh* itself.

Big business has long been demanding amendments to

the labour laws to allow for workers to be retrenched more easily. After the latest change, an estimated 80 percent of all Indian firms will be able to fire workers without needing to obtain government permission. Zubin Kabraji from the Confederation of Indian Industry insisted that the labour laws had to be amended but appealed to the unions for talks. "You can't run away from changes in labour laws, and there are better ways to negotiate deals than to shut down a city," he said.

The unions were also demanding that the government halt plans to lift quantitative restrictions on imports as part of India's commitments to the World Trade Organisation. This nationalist appeal aimed at protecting the weaker sections of Indian capital from international competition points to the common ground that the CPI (M) and CPI have with the extreme rightwing—economic nationalism and the defence of the Indian nation. Neither of these "communist" parties are based on the internationalist principles of socialism. For decades they have espoused the nationalist theory of "Socialism in One Country".

As the day of the protest approached Shiv Sena announced that it intended to back the strike. The party was founded in the 1960s on the basis of chauvinist attacks against migrant workers from other states and demanding job preferences for local Marathi-speakers. It is notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric and was involved in fomenting anti-Muslim pogroms in Bombay in the 1990s. Its goon squads have conducted physical attacks not only on Muslims but also on members of the CPI (M) and CPI.

Rapidly setting aside past differences and conflicts, the CPI (M), the CPI and their trade unions not only welcomed Shiv Sena's involvement, saying its presence would make the protest "a total success," but effectively handed over the leadership of the strike to the chauvinist party.

Shiv Sena thugs played a prominent role in the strike.

Party general secretary Subhash Desai told the media: “Of late the government has let loose. Privatisation and globalisation have been designed wrongly and they're not taking care of the working classes.” He attacked the growing influence of transnational corporations in India, declaring that international trade was too liberal. “We wish that the working community should be given proper protection.”

Mobs were organised to try to halt road and rail traffic. At a number of places throughout the city, buses were stoned. *Asian Age* journalist Vaibhav Purandare was assaulted by a group of thugs who reportedly said “Only the *Saamna* [the Shiv Sena newspaper] will come out tomorrow.” The following day, *Saamna* claimed full credit on behalf of Shiv Sena for the success of the bandh and warned the other unions not to “annoy” the party.

Shiv Sena's attempt to remake itself as a defender of “the working community” is a cynical exercise to resurrect itself in the eyes of its own supporters. For the last three years, the party has been a partner in the ruling national coalition led by the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and is politically responsible for the policies that have produced a growing polarisation between rich and poor. On March 1, even though it previously had threatened to oppose the privatisation of the Bharatha Aluminum Company, Shiv Sena voted with the government to defeat an opposition motion to block the sale.

Like the BJP itself, Shiv Sena is wracked by tensions. In the past, it has appealed to layers of small business and traders on the basis of so-called *swadeshi* policies—economic protection for Indian firms combined with virulent denunciations of foreign transnationals. In power, however, it has, as a capitalist party, been compelled by the logic of the market and the globalisation of production to accede to the opening up of competition. As the NDA government has implemented the IMF's demands, conflicts have emerged in the Hindu extremist ranks. Shiv Sena lost power at the state level in the 1999 assembly elections in Maharashtra.

The *Deccan Herald* commented on Shiv Sena's involvement in the Bombay strike in an article entitled “Sena hijacks left's agenda” published on May 1. “The Shiv Sena, the right wing staunch Hindutva [Hindu extremist] party which had fought street battles with the Leftists to establish itself in the metropolis, in one deft move literally hijacked their pro-labour agenda and claimed full credit for last week's successful Maharashtra bandh against the central and state governments' ‘anti-

labour' policies.”

The newspaper article noted: “Mr Thackeray's son and Sena leader Mr Uddhav was the lead speaker in all the press conferences addressed by trade unionists, who were relegated to the background. The maverick unionist Sharad Rao was even seen driving in a vehicle with saffron [the color identified with Hindu chauvinist groups] flags fluttering atop.”

The ability of Shiv Sena to “hijack” the strike and parade on the public stage as a defender of working people has depended on the acquiescence of the CPI (M) and CPI leaders. For decades these parties have justified various opportunist alliances with openly bourgeois parties by claiming that their partner at the time represented a more progressive wing of the Indian ruling class. So degenerate have these parties become that they now find themselves taking a back seat at press conferences to a fascistic party which has never hesitated to unleash its thugs against its political opponents.

In the aftermath of the strike, the general secretary of the CPI (M)-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions in Maharashtra told the media: “We welcome the Shiv Sena participation in the bandh. Of course, we are on parallel lines.” These words are a sharp warning to workers in Bombay and throughout India. The Stalinist parties are preparing to accommodate themselves not only to Shiv Sena but to other Hindu extremist organisations, including the BJP and the associated Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sang (RSS), whose agenda is to divert the country's growing social tensions down the reactionary road of communal conflict.



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