

India: Stalinists to promote Congress power bid

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The Communist Party of India (Marxist) will back a bid by the Congress party to form a coalition government if India's general election produces a hung parliament. The traditional governing party of India's economic and political elite, the Congress, is an enthusiastic supporter of the Indian bourgeoisie's "liberalization" agenda, which aims to make India a magnet for foreign capital through privatization, deregulation, cuts to social welfare programs, the dismantling of tariff protection for small farmers, and the gutting of worker rights.

Counting of the votes cast in India's multi-phase election is to begin today. However, it may be several days, even weeks, before the composition of the government becomes clear. Exit polls have indicated that the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a coalition dominated by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), will fall short of a majority, although it is still expected to win the most seats. The results of a state election in Andhra Pradesh, held concurrently with the general election but whose votes were tabulated Tuesday, have already dealt a major blow to the largest ally of the BJP in the outgoing parliament, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). In what is being interpreted by even the capitalist media as a popular backlash against the TDP's imposition of World Bank structural adjustment programs, the TDP state government has been swept from office, winning just 47 state assembly seats as compared to 226 for the Congress-led opposition alliance.

Anticipating a hung parliament and a post-election period of political horse-trading, the CPI (M) has taken the lead in trying to mobilize support for a Congress-led government from a disparate collection of regional and caste-based parties. On Tuesday, CPI (M) general secretary Harkrishan Singh Surjeet met with Congress leader and presumptive prime ministerial candidate Sonia Gandhi.

Tuesday's meeting followed statements from senior CPI (M) leaders excluding the possibility of a Third Front government, i.e. a coalition led by neither the BJP nor the Congress.

In its election manifesto the CPI (M) stated its principal objective is to "defeat the BJP and its allies," thereby signalling its readiness, if the post-election parliamentary arithmetic permitted, to bring a Congress-led government to power. Moreover, the CPI (M) all but explicitly urged working people to vote for the big business Congress under the following formulation: "In states where the Left is not a major force and the main polarisation is between the BJP and the Congress, the Party will fight a limited number of seats and conduct a general campaign calling for defeat of the BJP alliance."

While promoting the Congress as a "lesser evil" to the BJP, the Stalinists have also claimed to be trying to cobble together a Third Front, that would unite the CPI (M) led Left Front with various regional and caste-based parties, some of them recent BJP allies, as a "progressive" alternative to the Congress.

This two-track policy was dictated, on the one hand, by the hostility of working people, including the CPI (M)'s own voters, to the Congress, and on the other by the crudest electoral calculations. In those states, where

the CPI (M) is strongest—West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura—its principal electoral opponent is the Congress.

However, once it became apparent that the NDA will likely fall short of a parliamentary majority, the CPI (M) sprang into action to muster the parliamentary numbers needed to bring the Congress to power.

The Congress, for its part, has made clear that after eight years on the opposition benches it is anxious to get its hands on the reins of power and will not provide the parliamentary votes to sustain a non-Congress, non-BJP party government in office, as it did—in the hopes of coming back to power unencumbered by allies—between 1996-98. The Congress leadership's stand has been seconded by big business media, which in a spate of editorials has decried the prospect of a Third Front government on the grounds that it could impede the process of economic "reform" by giving too much leverage to smaller parties.

In rallying behind the Congress, the CPI (M) is seeking to bind the working class to the historic party of the Indian national bourgeoisie, and under conditions where the failure of the bourgeoisie's post-independence national project and the social devastation produced by capitalist globalization has produced a mounting social and political crisis.

The governing party for all but three of the first forty years of Indian independence, the Congress used socialist phrases to legitimize a national development project that consolidated the rule of the national bourgeoisie, while leaving India's masses mired in poverty and backwardness and perpetuating, albeit in attenuated forms, caste oppression and landlordism. Then in 1991, in response to capitalist globalization and the collapse of the Soviet Union, India's largest trading partner, the Congress made an aboutface and began dismantling India's nationally-regulated economy in the hopes of attracting foreign investment. Under India's new export-led growth strategy, the Indian bourgeoisie is seeking to carve out a niche in the world economy by serving as the providers of cheap labor to transnationals.

The reforms begun by the Narasimha Rao Congress government of 1991-96 have been pursued by all subsequent governments—by the CPI (M) supported United Front regimes of the middle 1990s and by the BJP-led NDA—in the face of inchoate, but widespread popular opposition.

In the just completed election campaign, the Congress made a carefully calibrated appeal to the popular discontent produced by increasing poverty, economic insecurity, and social inequality. For example it mocked the BJP's claims that India is shining. But the Congress has also made clear to big business that should it form the next government it will press forward with the reforms, including changes to labor laws that will facilitate layoffs, the contracting out of work, and plant closures.

To underscore this, the Congress-allied trade union federation opposed a one-day general strike last February called to protest against a savage July 2003 Supreme Court ruling that backed the Tamilnadu's state government's suppression of a strike by 200,000 public sector workers and proclaimed that public sector workers have no inherent right to strike.

Even the capitalist press concedes there are no significant differences

between the socio-economic platforms of the BJP-NDA and the Congress. Yet the CPI (M) maintains that a Congress government would be susceptible to popular pressure. Thus its manifesto complains “the Congress has not learnt lessons from the past,” as if this capitalist party could ever pursue policies in the interests of India’s toiling masses.

However, the principal argument the CPI (M) advances for supporting the Congress is that it represents a “secular” alternative to the Hindu chauvinist BJP.

According to the Stalinists the only way to defend the democratic rights of working people is to support the traditional party of the Indian ruling class—a party that itself has repeatedly adapted to communalism (as in the case of the BJP-led razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya), fomented communalism (Congress functionaries led the 1984 anti-Sikh riots) and that in 1947 joined with the British and the Muslim League to partition the subcontinent on communal lines.

The working class and toilers cannot combat, let alone defeat, the BJP through the Congress. The socially incendiary economic program of the Congress, like that of the BJP, will in the absence of the oppressed masses advancing a dynamic anti-capitalist program, produce fertile ground for all manner of divisive and reactionary chauvinist and caste-ist politics.

The rise over the past two decades of the BJP and a host of other political formations that make reactionary regional and caste-ist appeal is the consequence of the political paralysis of the working class, for which the CPI (M) is principally responsible.

For decades the Stalinists restricted the working class to trade union militancy while politically subordinating it to one or another bourgeois party or combination of parties:

This included alliances with the BJP’s forerunner, the Jana Sangh—most notoriously during the explosive struggle against Indira Gandhi’s Emergency—and with the BJP itself.

Whereas in the past the CPI (M) justified such alliances with the “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie in the name of fighting imperialism or feudal reaction, today it does so in the name of upholding secularism. So threadbare is the distinction the Stalinists have drawn between the BJP and the “democratic secular” forces that repeatedly it has embraced as secular allies parties that have just quit the NDA. The most infamous example of this was CPI (M)’s support for the election of the same AIADMK Tamilnadu state government that later used scabs and mass firings to break the July 2003 state workers’ strike.

The CPI (M)’s emergence as the parliamentary whip for a Congress-led coalition underscores that it is nothing more than the left-face of the Indian bourgeois political establishment.

The CPI (M) was the third largest party at the last all-India election in 1999, winning 5.4 percent of the popular vote and 32 seats. The CPI-M led Left Front has governed West Bengal since 1977 and has repeatedly formed state governments in Kerala and Tripura. But the CPI (M)’s importance to the politics of the Indian establishment go far beyond its electoral support. Under conditions where the Congress and its rivals have disintegrated into a myriad of warring factions, the Stalinists have emerged as important facilitators in the day-to-day haggling among the political elite. The CPI (M)’s principal importance, however, is as the officially-sanctioned representative of the working class, a fiction that is bound up with it being far and away the largest party that lays claim to the legacy of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The CPI was formed in response to the 1917 October Revolution. It struck deep roots in the working class and among sections of the peasantry and intelligentsia as the perceived representative of revolutionary socialism. But before the lessons of the Russian Revolution—in particular the necessity of the working class waging a relentless struggle to wrest the leadership of the democratic revolution or anti-imperialist struggle from the bourgeoisie and joining it to the world struggle for socialism—could be assimilated, the CPI fell under the political tutelage of the emerging

Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

Here is not the place to retrace the foul history of Indian Stalinism. But it must be noted that the CPI was complicit in the Congress’ abortion of the anti-imperialist struggle and partition of India. During World War II, the CPI supported the British colonial regime and the Muslim League’s Pakistan Demand. Then in 1945-46 as India was convulsed by worker-peasant struggles of an insurrectionary character, it pleaded with the Congress and Muslim League, whose daggers were already drawn against each, to combine in an “anti-imperialist front”.

So discredited was the CPI, that in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, the majority of the membership broke away to form the CPI (M). But this new party perpetuated the essential politics of Stalinism, proclaiming that the task of the working class was to support the progressive wing of the bourgeoisie in completing the national revolution. Within a few years of its formation, the CPI (M) was actively participating in the Indian state’s suppression of the misguided Naxalite peasant rebellion.

Over the past quarter-century the CPI (M) has, through its role in government in West Bengal and Kerala, emerged as the spokesman for regional sections of the Indian petty bourgeoisie in the struggle for patronage and subsidies from the Union government and, increasingly since 1991, for foreign investment.

The CPI (M) government in West Bengal has itself embraced “liberalization,” arguing that it is following the model of “socialist” China. To this end, it has established Special Economic Zones at Faalta and Salt Lake where labor laws that provide minimal job security and working conditions do not apply. Increasingly the Stalinist apparatus has forged relations with international capital. In recent months, both Jyoti Basu and his successor as West Bengal chief minister, Buddhadev Bhattacharya, have attacked the trade unions, saying that workers must learn discipline and forego strikes if West Bengal is to be able to secure investment.

In its election manifesto, the CPI (M) denounces the BJP often in virulent rhetoric for seeking a strategic alliance with US imperialism. However it does so from the standpoint of the traditional “national interests” of the Indian bourgeoisie. Thus it does not call for the unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq, but rather for “ending of occupation by US and its allies, and strengthening multilateral forums like UN to deal with all disputes between countries.” To this is added the call for “democratizing the UN Security Council and UN structure.”

The CPI (M)’s position reflects the concern of sections of the Indian elite that the BJP has allied India too closely with an increasingly reckless US imperialism and that New Delhi should maintain greater autonomy so it can pursue alliances with other imperialist and great powers, including the European Union, Russia and China.

India is facing a period of social convulsions. The Indian bourgeoisie has ambitions to transform India into a world power by making it a cheap labor office, laboratory and workshop for international capital and by relentlessly expanding its military, including its nuclear arsenal. Both of these objectives can only be achieved through a rapid intensification of the exploitation of working people and the build up of the authoritarian powers of the state.

Unable to find a base of popular support for this program, the Indian bourgeoisie has increasingly turned to the reactionary and divisive politics of communalism, caste-ism and regionalism.

More than ever, the Indian working class needs to draw the strategic lessons of the titanic struggles of the twentieth century, not least those that rocked the subcontinent. A new revolutionary party of the working class and oppressed must be built on the basis of the strategy of permanent revolution. That is the understanding that the struggle against imperialism and the liquidation of all vestiges of pre-capitalist modes of exploitation is

only possible if the working class breaks politically free of the bourgeoisie and those like the CPI (M) that bind it to the bourgeoisie, places itself at the head of the oppressed masses, and joins its struggle with that of the international working class against world capitalism.



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