

Indian Stalinists' alliance with the Congress-led UPA: a trap for the working class

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7 October 2004

In recent weeks, the Left Front, a four-party electoral bloc led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, has repeatedly expressed dismay at the actions of India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government—a minority government that came to power and survives in office only because of the Left Front's parliamentary support.

In August, Left Front-aligned trade unions mounted a national day of action to protest the government's privatization plans, a 1 percent cut in the interest paid by the government's Employees Provident Fund, and other regressive measures. Last week, the Left Front prevailed on the UPA regime to abandon plans to have representatives of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and private management firms McKinsey and the Boston Consulting Group sit on consultative panels set up to assist in a governmental, mid-term review of the country's five-year plan.

Some CPM leaders have suggested that the 62 Left Front MPs could withdraw their support for the UPA. Such action would almost invariably cause the four-and-a-half month-old coalition government to collapse, since the Congress-led UPA holds just 220 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats.

To its great surprise, the Congress and UPA were propelled into office in last May's elections on a wave of popular opposition to the neo-liberal, economic reform program that every Indian government has pursued since 1991. Rhetorically the new government has sharply distinguished itself from the previous governmental coalition, which was led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress head Sonia Gandhi and other UPA leaders make daily professions of their concern for the poor and their commitment to job creating-policies. But the UPA, like the BJP before it, is implementing the key elements of the program of the Indian bourgeoisie: the dismantling of what remains of the nationally-regulated economy so as to transform India into a cheap-labor preserve for international capital, the rapid expansion of India's armed forces, and the pursuit of a strategic partnership with US imperialism.

The UPA's first budget cut the overall sum for rural development and employment programs, notwithstanding a Congress election promise to immediately introduce a scheme to provide one member of every rural family with at least 100 paid days of work per year. Military spending, meanwhile, was raised by a whopping 17 percent. When Prime Minister Singh travelled to the US last month, he pledged support for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism," then promised the US president that the "best is yet to come" in Indo-US relations.

The indignation of working people over the actions of the UPA is real and deep-rooted. The threats of the Left Front leaders, on the other hand, are a ploy aimed at pressuring the UPA government to slow the pace of neo-liberal reform and at refurbishing the Left Front's tattered socialist credentials.

The most senior leaders of the CPM have repeatedly said that their hope and intention is to sustain the Congress-led UPA in power for a full five-year term. "We want the UPA to stay in office for five years," declared Jyoti Basu, arguably the most senior CPM leader and a former chief

minister of West Bengal, on September 19, after meeting privately with Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi.

Basu said that the Congress leadership had responded positively to calls from the Stalinist-led Left Front for consultation on the implementation of the UPA government's agenda. Consultation, he added, did not mean bowing to the Left Front's demands.

"The Government may be compelled to take certain decisions even in face of opposition from us. But, it should nevertheless, take the Leftists into confidence."

The alliance between the Left Front and the Congress constitutes a trap for the working class and oppressed masses. Under the pretext that the Congress is the lesser evil to the Hindu supremacist BJP, the CPM and its Left Front are subordinating the working class to a big business government pursuing a socially incendiary agenda that is producing ever-greater economic insecurity and social inequality. Not only will this mean a further erosion in the social position of the working class and toiling masses; in so far as the working class is prevented by the Stalinists from advancing a socialist alternative to the deepening social crisis, the Congress-Left Front alliance will facilitate the growth of all manner of reactionary political forces that fan communal and caste divisions, including the Hindu supremacist the BJP.

The Congress: the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie

There is no doubt that the Indian ruling class was staggered by the results of last May's election, for they revealed, even only if in a distorted and partial form, the depth of popular anger and the potential for a mass social upheaval. But in so far as the popular discontent found political expression through increased support for the Congress, the election results have provided India's ruling class with a political mechanism to deflect and contain it and press forward with further economic "reforms." The Congress, after all, is the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie. Moreover, historically the secret of its success has been its ability to use populist phrases and, during the first decades after independence, limited social reforms to bind the masses to the program of the national bourgeoisie.

In this regard, it is important to note that the BJP's refusal to cooperate with the Congress-led government and try—just as the Republicans did during the Clinton administration—to overturn the election results have, to date, found almost no support from India's corporate media and business houses. The bourgeoisie calculates that the Congress-led UPA, because of its populist rhetoric, is at present a more effective instrument for pressing forward with a new stage of economic reforms focussing on promoting labor market "flexibility" than the BJP, which is widely and rightly perceived to be a party of the rich and communalist reaction.

The Congress party, however, is a mere shadow of its former self. It has not won a majority of the seats in the Lok Sabha since the 1984 elections. Even more significant is the long-term withering of any connection between the Congress and the rural masses. From a party popularly identified with a genuine, mass anti-imperialist movement, the Congress has evolved into a narrowly based, corrupt appendage of the Nehru-Gandhi family.

Hence, the vital importance of the Stalinists to the politics of the bourgeoisie. Both during and since the elections, the CPM and its Left Front have sought to contain the mass discontent within the framework of parliamentary politics and corral it behind the big business Congress.

The Congress leadership, for its part, is acutely aware of its dependence on the Stalinists and has sought to formally associate the Left Front with the government. Parliamentary arithmetic undoubtedly has played a role in this, but the Congress leaders' efforts to woo the Stalinists arise out of their recognition that the Left Front provides the government with vitally needed populist credentials in implementing the dictates of big business.

No sooner had Sonia Gandhi delighted the money markets by naming Manmohan Singh—the finance minister in the Congress government that in 1991 initiated neo-liberal reform—as India's Prime Minister, than she went about trying to convince the Left Front leaders to formally enter the government by accepting cabinet seats. The Communist Party of India (CPI), the second largest of the parties that constitute the Left Front, indicated it would be willing to do so, but only if its partners did likewise. After several days of deliberations, the CPM announced it would support the government from "the outside." CPM leaders feared that participation in a Congress-led government could gravely undermine the CPM's electoral base, since in the two states where its support is strongest, West Bengal and Kerala, the Congress is its principal rival. But in justifying their decision, CPM leaders also argued that if they joined the government, the BJP would be able to monopolize the opposition to the new government. In other words, whatever their public claims about the possibility of pressuring the Congress-led UPA to pursue pro-people policies, the Stalinists recognize that the new government is going to implement big business policies that will provoke widespread popular opposition.

Subsequently, the CPM did agree to a Congress request that Somnath Chatterjee, the leader of the CPM's delegation in the previous Lok Sabha, accept the post of parliamentary speaker. This gesture was meant to demonstrate that the CPM recognizes it has a "responsibility" to make the new government and parliament "work" and to add weight to its declarations that it intends to support the Congress-led UPA regime for parliament's full five-year term.

The Common Minimum Program fraud

Even more important and politically telling was the Stalinists' role in the formulation of the Common Minimum Programme (CMP), the document that is supposed to serve as the UPA's governmental agenda. The Left Front negotiated the CMP's wording with senior Congress leaders. Then in early August, they formed with representatives of the ruling UPA a committee to "coordinate and monitor" the government's implementation of the CMP.

The CMP is a fiction and a fraud, which has arisen out of the Congress' election campaign attempt—encapsulated in its call "for reforms with a human face"—to make a calibrated appeal to popular discontent, while assuring big business that it supports further privatization, deregulation, and the gutting of restrictions on laying off workers and closing plant. The CMP's animating principle is that the bourgeoisie's program for making

India a haven for international capital and raising India to the status of a great power can be made compatible with the needs and aspirations of India's toiling masses. But in India, as around the world, capitalist globalization has been accompanied by a never-ending assault on the social position of the working class, growing poverty and social polarization.

Faced with growing popular anger at the UPA government's right-wing course, the Stalinists have raised as their principal demand that the Congress fulfill the CMP, thereby investing the CMP with still further legitimacy and seeking to contain the popular opposition within the framework of appeals to the Congress to change course.

This is entirely in keeping with the actions of the CPM in the three states where it holds or has held office over the past 13 years. CPM-led governments in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura have themselves sought to woo international investors by implementing neo-liberal policies. Indeed, some of those opposed to the Left Front's demand that representatives of foreign interests be removed from the panels looking at the five-year plan pointed out that the CPM-led state governments have themselves frequently employed McKinsey and similar proponents of capitalist globalization to produce their economic policy documents.

The struggle against communal reaction

Important as is the CMP, the Stalinists' chief argument for supporting the Congress-led UPA is that it is the only means to keep the Hindu-supremacist BJP at bay. According to Jyoti Basu, "This is a particular situation. Today, we are supporting the Congress, which we had opposed for the last 45 years. We are dependent on them as much as they are dependent on us. The BJP is responsible for this."

Basu's statement begs the question: Why were the Hindu supremacists—hitherto a marginal force—able to exploit the crisis created by the unravelling of the Indian bourgeoisie's post-independence national development project?

It is the politics of the Stalinist parties, the CPM and CPI, that have politically paralyzed the working class, preventing it from placing itself at the head of India's toiling masses in a challenge to capitalist rule.

While Basu claims to have always opposed the Congress, the truth is that his Left Front partner, the CPI, has frequently openly allied itself with the Congress. As for the CPM, it has repeatedly urged working people to support one or another capitalist political bloc, including, as during the Janata period (1977-1979), formations in which the Hindu supremacists participated. Whatever their differences, both Stalinist parties have sought to constrain the working class within the framework of parliamentary politics and trade union struggles.

Before the Indian bourgeoisie's 1991 repudiation of its post-independence national economic development project, in which import substitution and state-planning were employed to promote the expansion of national capital, the Stalinists justified their support for one or another capitalist party on the grounds that the working class had to support the "progressive wing" of the national bourgeoisie against imperialism and feudal reaction. Today, when the bourgeoisie itself has forged a new, closer partnership with imperialism, the Stalinists continue to tie the working class to capitalist politics, but in the name of opposing the BJP and upholding India's secular constitution. No matter that the Stalinists themselves concede that the Congress has repeatedly connived with communalist reaction.

Certainly, the rise of the BJP, Shiva Sena and other extreme right-wing forces constitutes a grave danger to India's toiling masses. However, communal reaction cannot be defeated and the democratic rights of

working people defended by subordinating the working class to a government that is pursuing economic policies that can only further aggravate poverty and social inequality. Rather, the rise of communalist and caste-ist politics, like the bourgeoisie's turn to a new and closer relationship with imperialism, underscores the urgency of the working class adopting a fundamentally new perspective: the independent political mobilization of the working class, so as to make it a pole of attraction for all of India's toiling masses, and on the understanding that the eradication of poverty and liquidation of all the vestiges of India's colonial past and belated capitalist development are possible only through a socialist struggle, aimed at wresting power from the national bourgeoisie, and in concert with the international working class.



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