

One-day general strike in India exposes need for socialist-internationalist strategy

Wije Dias, Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate in Sri Lanka
29 September 2005

Tens of millions of workers in India, both those employed by the state and by the private sector, will join a one-day general strike today to protest against the neo-liberal policies being implemented by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

The UPA, which is sustained in power by the parliamentary votes of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allies in the Left Front, was propelled into office just 16 months ago on a tidal wave of popular anger at the social dislocation and misery produced by capitalist globalization.

But the new government has pressed forward with the very same program as that implemented by the previous coalition headed by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Although the Congress-led UPA refrains from the BJP's "India Shining" celebration of rising stock prices and social inequality and routinely professes its concern for the 325 million Indians who live on less than a \$1 a day, it, no less than the BJP, is determined to make India a cheap-labor haven for world capital and a base from which the Indian bourgeoisie can fight for profits and geo-political influence on the world stage.

The massive support for today's protest across the length and breadth of India is testimony to the elemental urge of India's workers and toilers to find a means to defend and secure their basic economic and social rights.

However, those who are leading today's protest—the union bureaucracy and above all the CPI (M)-led Left Front—are adamantly opposed to mobilizing the working class as an independent political force and making it, through the struggle for a comprehensive program of socialist and democratic demands, the vanguard of a movement of all India's toiling masses and oppressed against the capitalist social order.

Their aim in initiating today's protest is to harness the growing social discontent to their leadership so as to be able to shackle it to the Congress-led UPA government.

The 16-point program adopted by "the National Convention of Trade Unions," the ad hoc body through which the protest has been called, raises some of the urgent issues facing the working class. These include: opposition to privatization, contracting out and casualization; a halt to pro-employer changes to labor laws; enactment and enforcement of minimum standards and social benefits for agricultural laborers, the tens of millions of workers employed by small firms, and those working in the Special Economic Zones and Export Processing Zones; and the strengthening of the public distribution system which provides food to the poor.

But the Convention's political orientation is summed up in its appeal to the big business Congress government "to immediately effect a directional change." The CPI (M), for its part, has repeatedly proclaimed its intention to sustain the Congress-led UPA in power for a full five-year term and has formed an electoral bloc with the Congress and the casteist Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) for the coming Bihar state election.

Fourteen years ago, faced with the shipwreck of the national economic development strategy it had pursued since independence, the Indian bourgeoisie, with the then Congress government of Narasimha Rao at the helm, effected a fundamental change in its class strategy. National

economic regulation was abandoned in favor of a strategy aimed at strengthening the position of Indian big business by forging closer ties to international capital and fully integrating India into the world capitalist economy.

To attract foreign capital and bolster the position of Indian business in the fight for export markets, all Indian governments have systematically privatized state-owned corporations, cut jobs in state-owned industry, slashed public and social services, reduced price supports and subsidies for agricultural products and otherwise tried to shift government spending from income support to investment in the infrastructure projects demanded by big business.

While the Indian bourgeoisie exalts in a recent rise in foreign investment and economic growth rates, life for hundreds of millions has been marked by ever-greater economic insecurity and hardship.

The working class has confronted an unrelenting employer offensive with the elimination of jobs through privatization and contracting out and the Supreme Court issuing a series of rulings attacking the rights to strike and mount political protests. One measure of this offensive is the ratio of person workdays lost to lockouts—that is work stoppages initiated by employers—as compared with strikes. In 2003 and 2004 some 37.5 million person days were lost to lockouts as compared to just 7.6 million days lost due to strikes.

In the countryside, unemployment, rising debt and cuts to subsidies, price support and social programs have produced mounting distress, including a drop in the per capita consumption of key grains and thousands of farmer suicides.

And while India has embarked on a massive military build-up in pursuit of the bourgeoisie's goal of world-power status, government expenditure on health care has fallen to less than 1 percent of GDP.

Given that every Union and state government—including those formed by the Left Front in West Bengal and Kerala—have pursued their "reform" program, it is patently absurd to suggest that the Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie, will be pressured into making a "directional change."

Indeed, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has repeatedly insisted that the pace of reform must be accelerated. Even as the plans for today's protest were being drawn up, it was revealed that the Labour Ministry was circulating a note, reputedly drawn up by the Prime Minister's office, that proposes amending the *Industrial Disputes Act* and *Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act* in the name of "labour market flexibility." The proposals include gutting restrictions on the layoff of workers and contracting out of jobs and replacing government certification of whether a company is conforming with labor laws with "self"—i.e., employer—regulation.

Acutely aware of the popular opposition to the government's neo-liberal reform program, Manmohan Singh and Congress leader Sonia Gandhi make a point of professing their concern for the masses and claim that their objective is "reform but with a human face."

Instead of denouncing this as a cruel hoax and exposing the impossibility of reconciling the needs of the masses with the bourgeoisie's program of removing all restraints on capital and subordinating all areas of social life to the market, the CPI (M)-led Left Front is working assiduously to build up illusions in the susceptibility of Congress to mass pressure.

This is exemplified by their promoting of the UPA's Common Minimum Programme (CMP). Ostensibly the government's program, the CMP combines vague saccharine promises of help for the poor with a commitment to continuing the economic reforms.

In response to the ever-mounting attacks of the UPA regime on the masses and its pursuit of ever closer relations with the Bush administration, the Left Front urges not the mobilization of the working class against the UPA, but a campaign to pressure it to implement the pro-reform CMP.

This is clearly spelt out by the CPI (M) in the editorial in the current issue of its weekly *People's Democracy*, "Forward To September 29." Answering critics in the bourgeois media who have said that there is a contradiction between the Left Front's voting to sustain the UPA government in power and its organizing of a national day of protest, *People's Democracy* declares, "The Left parties' decision is not only not a contradiction, but in fact strengthens the popular pressure on the UPA government to implement much of the promises that it itself made when it adopted the Common Minimum Programme as a governmental policy. Much of the demands raised in the [National Union Convention] charter find mention in the Common Minimum Programme and therefore need to be implemented in right earnest urgently."

The editorial ends with an appeal permeated with nationalism: "All Indian patriots who cherish the future prosperity of the country and the welfare of the people must come forward to support this action for building a better India tomorrow."

In so far as the CPI (M) and the unions oppose the "globalization agenda" of the government, it is from the standpoint of defending the nationally-regulated capitalist economy of the past and the interests of the national bourgeoisie. No wonder then that some of the Left Front's criticisms—as in the case of the sell off of the most profitable of the public sector companies, many of them in the strategic energy sector, and the opening up of the defence sector to foreign investment—have been applauded by significant sections of the corporate media.

The Left Front's nationalism is diametrically opposed to the program of socialist internationalism: to answer the global offensive of capital, workers in India must make their first principle the fight to unite their struggles with those of workers across the subcontinent, Asia and the major advanced capitalist centers of Europe and North America.

Apart from the ultra-right BJP, which regularly fulminates against "communism" and "communist" influence over the UPA government, India's elite has said little about today's national strike. This is because the Indian ruling class long ago took the measure of the CPI (M) and the other components of the Left Front and well-recognizes them to be essential props of the existing political and social order.

In this regard, it is worth taking note of comments made by Manmohan Singh in a recent interview with the elite business publication, *McKinsey Quarterly*. India's Prime Minister defended his alliance with the Left Front from the standpoint of building the "broad-based consensus" needed to implement retrograde changes to India's labor laws and other "reforms."

Referring to the West Bengal state government, headed by the CPI (M) leader Buddhadeb Chattarjee, Singh declared, "Our colleagues who are in government in West Bengal ... do appreciate the need for labor market flexibility. It is my task to carry conviction to our Left colleagues in Delhi. I haven't given up, and I am confident that when all things are considered I think the reform will have more broad-based support."

In response to a further question, Singh lavished praise on the Left Front

government in West Bengal for its privatization program then affirmed: "I have full confidence in the patriotism of our Left colleagues to believe that in the final analysis of what is good for India, they will also be on board."

The CPI (M)'s decision not to join the government in Delhi is a tactical move, aimed not at blocking the implementation of neo-liberal policies, but at keeping control of the opposition to the Congress-led government.

If there is a difference between the policies of the governments at the Center and in West Bengal, it is that in West Bengal the neo-liberal structural changes are implemented more ruthlessly than elsewhere in India, because the CPI (M) uses its control of the trade union apparatus to suppress all opposition, trampling upon the democratic rights of rank-and-file workers.

When Battacharjee visited Indonesia in August, he signed agreements with several multi-national enterprises there, including some with close connections to the former dictator Suharto, who presided over the massacre of over half a million members of the Indonesian Communist Party when he seized power in 1965. Battacharjee, when asked how his government would respond if a labor dispute arose against a foreign company operating in West Bengal, told the *Jakarta Post*: "Our involvement in trade unions is an advantage. The majority of workers are in support of this government. And we are trying to change their mindset. I tell them, look this is a new situation. We need FDI (foreign direct investments), we need infrastructure."

The hypocrisy and double-dealing of the CPI (M) is glaringly exposed by the attitude of the West Bengal state government towards the September 29 strike.

According to a September 25 *Express India* news report: "Neither Chief Minister Buddhadeb Battacharjee nor his cabinet colleagues, with the sole exception of Labour Minister Mohammad Amin will be seen campaigning for the strike. This marks a sharp deviation from the past, when ministers from the CPI (M) used to play an overt part in strikes." Eager to placate foreign investors, the West Bengal government doesn't want to be seen promoting strikes.

One need only add that the CPI (M)'s attitude is not a deviation, but the logical outcome of the class collaborationist, nationalist line it has pursued since its founding in 1964. While in its early years critical of the CPI for its brazen support for the Congress, the CPI (M) has likewise always sought to limit the struggles of the working class to trade union militancy and parliamentarianism, while arguing that in the name of the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal or anti-communal struggle that the working class must align with one or another parties of the bourgeoisie.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka has nominated me to stand in the November 17 presidential elections so as to bring before the workers and toiling masses of the island, Indian subcontinent and Asia the necessity for the development of a political movement of the working class on the basis of an international socialist program.

We base ourselves on the revolutionary traditions of the Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India that fought against the division of mainland South Asia in 1947 into two communally based states and the establishment of a separate state on the tiny island of Sri Lanka in 1948. The creation of these states with their rival bourgeoisies only served to divide the powerful working class of the sub-continent and subjugate them to the dictates of finance capital.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India, from which the CPI (M) emerged, helped deliver the mass anti-imperialist movement to the bourgeois Indian National Congress and the horror of partition, by oscillating between hailing the Gandhi-led Congress as the leader of the national-democratic revolution and its World War II support for the British colonial state. Post-independence, the CPI and subsequently the CPI (M) hailed the bourgeois-led Indian state that came into being out of the abortion of the anti-imperialist struggle, as a bulwark against

imperialism. In line with that position, the Stalinists today claim the oppressed masses of India can fight imperialism and the ravages of capitalist globalization through the Indian capitalist nation-state.

The SEP and our co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International by contrast insist that the struggle against capitalist globalization and imperialism is only possible through the unification of the working-class in struggle against capitalism and its outmoded nation-state system. As part of this struggle and in opposition to the foul chauvinist, communalist and casteist politics promoted by the rival bourgeois regimes of South Asia, the SEP fights for a united socialist federation of South Asia.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact