

Indian Stalinists pledge to stamp out further IT work disruptions

Keith Jones
9 November 2005

The Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, has concluded a weeks-long internal debate over strikes that disrupt information technology (IT) and IT-enabled service (ITES) industries and over the rights of workers in these rapidly expanding sectors of India's economy. Speaking to the press October 26, CPM leaders said that their just concluded two-day Polit Bureau meeting had affirmed that IT and ITES workers should have the right to form unions and to bargain collectively, including in some instances the right to strike.

This decision is a ruse and a sham. It is meant to obscure the fact that the CPM—the principal component of the Left Front, the parliamentary bloc that governs the state of West Bengal and that sustains the minority United Progressive Alliance government in power at the center—has capitulated to the demands of West Bengal's IT and ITES companies that it ensure worker protests do not again disrupt their operations.

The IT, call center and business processing bosses were outraged when a one-day, all-India general strike sponsored by the Left Front and allied unions resulted in demonstrations and protests that shut down most of their facilities in West Bengal. Supporters of the strike blockaded roads and refused to allow IT and ITES personnel through, although the Left Front government had issued them "essential service" stickers.

Eight days after the September 29 strike, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the chief minister of West Bengal and a CPM Polit Bureau member, went before the IT and ITES bosses to make amends. He told them he shared their outrage and would ensure that they would face no such disruptions in the future. According to press reports, Bhattacharjee declared, "This menace [of strikes and *bandhs*] is known to me. I can assure you that the strongest action will be taken against such perpetrators in the future. I will deal with the matter at the administrative and political levels." The chief minister then pledged to representatives of Wipro, Tata Consultancy Services, PricewaterhouseCoopers and other IT and ITES companies: "As far as the IT and ITES companies are

concerned, I can say that they experienced the last strike on September 29."

"It's an encouraging sign to see the chief minister taking such a proactive stand," Bikram Dasgupta, Globsyn Technologies chairman, told reporters at the conclusion of the meeting. Bhattacharjee "has categorically assured us that such events will not recur."

Bhattacharjee's promise to uphold "people's right to go to their workplaces on a *bandh* day" is in keeping with the Left Front government's concerted drive to woo IT and ITES investment. Not only has the West Bengal government offered IT and ITES companies tax and land concessions and waived a raft of labour regulations, including restrictions on night and holiday work; it has given IT and ITES companies the status of a "public utility," which makes it much more difficult for workers to gain the legal right to strike and far easier for the government to declare any job action illegal.

According to the *Telegraph*, Bhattacharjee "touched the collective chord of the company heads." His diatribe against workers who dare to disrupt IT and ITES operations sparked opposition, however, from within the CPM leadership, especially from the CPM-aligned Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

Relations between West Bengal's Left Front government and the CITU leadership have become increasingly strained as Bhattacharjee and his ministers have demanded with every greater regularity and shrillness that the unions curb worker militancy and as the West Bengal government itself resorts with increasing frequency to using contract labour.

In August, just before leaving on a trip to meet with potential investors in Southeast Asia, Bhattacharjee declared, "What I am trying to do is to create an investment-friendly climate in (West Bengal), not only in our speeches in chambers of commerce but also in our actions. We face an image problem. We committed mistakes in the '60s and '70s. Investors are still apprehensive about us. Now we are trying to motivate workers and employees. This is a very competitive world. Productivity and production quality are

not the responsibility of managements alone, even workers have to share it. For me, it is perform or perish.”

The CITU leadership fully supports the West Bengal government’s efforts to attract international capital. But it resents being marginalized in government decision-making and finds itself under pressure from a rank and file that is increasingly agitated by the Indian bourgeoisie’s drive to gut labour standards and restrictions on layoffs, plant closures and the contracting out of work.

In any event, Bhattacharjee’s blatant intervention in support of the IT and ITES bosses triggered a major spat within the CPM leadership.

The decision of the Polit Bureau on the IT/ITES issue had a double aim: to paper over these differences and to refurbish the CPM’s claim to be a champion of workers’ rights.

But two things make clear the real import of the CPM leadership’s decision—that the Stalinists have capitulated to the adverse business reaction to the September 29 strike and will henceforth stamp out any attempt to disrupt West Bengal’s IT and ITES sectors.

First, CPM leaders told the press that none other than Chief Minister Bhattacharjee will have full power to determine how the Polit Bureau’s position will be applied in West Bengal.

Bhattacharjee has, of course, made his virulent opposition to further disruptions of the IT and ITES sector crystal clear. So anxious was he to distance himself from worker protests, he made a show of going into his chief minister’s office on the day of the all-India strike and berated pickets, saying they had no right to prevent people from going to work, after they prevented his wife from reporting to her job at a private library.

Second, while saying that IT and ITES workers should have the right to form unions, the Stalinist leaders emphasized their support for India’s labor laws. Far from being the embodiment of workers’ rights, these laws were designed by the British colonial state and the bourgeois Indian National Congress so as to circumscribe workers’ power, including limiting the right to strike to specially defined periods, and to foster class collaboration and the development of a labor bureaucracy.

“The Polit Bureau, including West Bengal chief minister, Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharaya,” announced CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat, “unanimously asserted that employees” in the IT sector “should have the right to form trade unions and collective bargaining.” But Karat then hastened to add, “Even in West Bengal, the IT sector falls under the public utility service and the workers have to give a 15-day notice for going on strike.”

In explaining the CPM leadership’s stand, Anil Biswas,

Polit Bureau member and the CPM state secretary for West Bengal, said, “The IT sector faces no threat in Bengal and IT companies are always welcome.” Asked whether future protest strikes might disrupt IT operations, Biswas said, “People have the right to form unions in every service but the mode of protest has to be decided in consultation with the government.” In other words, the government can rule strike action illegal.

The Polit Bureau further decided to prepare a document for the next CPM Central Committee meeting that would identify core services in the IT and ITES sectors in which strikes should be forbidden.

Microsoft India Chairman Ravi Venkatesan deplored the CPM decision, saying, “It is not clear how the formation of unions will help” the IT sector.

But the meaning of the CPM’s decision was not lost on the *New Indian Express*, which itself responded to the September 29 all-India strike by urging the Indian government ban all strikes and unions. In the first editorial of its October 28 on-line edition, the *New Indian Express* declared, “CPM’s decision on strikes in the IT sector was wise.... The CPM has done well to leave the decision on strikes affecting the IT sector to the West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. It is also fortunate that the West Bengal chief minister has won his battle within the CPM on the issue.”

The editorial concluded by urging the CPM to take the next step and accept new restrictions on the right to strike in manufacturing and other key economic sectors. The *Times of India* argued in a similar vein: “Left-ruled Bengal ... has now effectively outlawed trade unions in the IT sector.... That has helped Bengal ... attract tech investments, create jobs and boost incomes through the last three years.... If Bengal’s IT experience is any indicator, unions ought to be outlawed in most fast-growing sectors in India.”

The CPM and the Left Front posture as defenders of the working class and toilers. Yet they are propping up a Congress-led government at the center that is intent on transforming India into a cheap labor haven for world capital by destroying what few protections and public services working people still enjoy. And to woo investors to West Bengal, they are aiding and abetting big business’ assault on the most elementary rights of workers.



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