

WSWS International Editorial Board meeting

South Asia and the political bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism

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The Congress-led coalition government in India is currently boasting that it will raise the country's economic growth over 8 percent this year. At the same time, it brags of its unprecedented close relations with Washington, particularly in working out a deal on civilian nuclear technology.

Taken at face value, these declarations would seem to paint a bright future for capitalist rule in India. But what are the prospects? A realistic answer can only be found when one considers India within the context of the present world situation.

Let us consider the issue of US-India relations. The joint statement issued after President George W. Bush met with visiting Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last July characterised their discussion as "a defining moment". Reflecting the sentiments of pro-US sections of the Indian ruling elite, Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran expressed his elation as follows:

"The wide-ranging nature of the various cooperative initiatives that were envisaged and their relationship to issues of fundamental concern to both countries announced that the strategic partnership had moved beyond its declaratory phase. We set for ourselves an ambitious agenda that necessarily challenged orthodox thinking. If we were to realise the vision that our leaderships had not only for Indo-US ties but on larger global issues, clearly a new framework for our discourse had to emerge. That, for the moment, is represented by the July 18 joint statement that we hope to implement and then take forward in the coming weeks."

One of the "cooperative initiatives" being hailed by India's ruling Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is the Bush administration's steps to assist the development of Indian nuclear energy projects. This is declared to be a sure sign of the developing "strategic partnership" between India and the US.

What this "partnership" means in real terms, however, was revealed recently by none other than the US ambassador to India, David Mulford. Referring to Washington's provocative efforts to have the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) refer Iran to the UN Security Council, Mulford declared: "If India decided not to vote against Iran, the US-India deal on nuclear energy cooperation would die." To make sure the point was not missed, he added: "If Delhi failed to back efforts to refer Iran to the UN Security Council, the effect that would bring on the members of the [US] Congress with regard to the civil nuclear initiative will be devastating."

The tone and words used in no way resemble a partnership of equals.

The remarks are far more like a threat coming from a colonial master to a local stooge who is hesitating in following orders.

Another example of the Bush administration's ruthlessness in dealing with India came to light last year. In August, after Manmohan Singh met the US president, India voted for a US-backed IAEA resolution against Iran, provoking dissension in New Delhi ruling circles. The vote threatened an Indian agreement with Iran to build an overland gas pipeline to help resolve India's growing energy crisis.

In an attempt to pacify Iran, Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh visited Tehran to explain India's predicament. During his trip, the foreign minister made a public statement indicating that India would not support American efforts to refer Iran to the UN Security Council over its alleged nuclear weapons programs.

These comments immediately drew a bipartisan hostile response from the US political establishment. Democratic Party Congressman Lantos declared: "This position is contrary to what we understood the [Bush] administration was trying to achieve in forging India's role in the world nuclear regime."

The *New York Times* reported that Bush administration officials let it be known that "India must now choose who is the best partner to meet its surging energy needs—Iran or the West."

Not long after his trip to Tehran, Singh was unceremoniously removed from his post as foreign minister after being named in the Volker Commission report for alleged wrongdoing in the UN Food for Oil program in Iraq. The sensitive foreign ministry was transferred to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

While corruption scandals are not uncommon in India, Singh's removal from a key ministry was not in any sense an ordinary affair. His views represented nationalist sections of the ruling elite who still believe that India's interests are better served by "non-alignment" than by a one-sided embrace of Washington. In its pursuit of global hegemony, however, the US will not tolerate half-hearted support and Singh got his marching orders.

This episode again confirmed that a strategic alliance with the US will not be smooth sailing for New Delhi.

The US considers it important to forge close ties to India for several reasons. Firstly, the US regards India as an important cheap labour platform and market as well as a potential economic and strategic counterweight to China. Secondly, Washington wants to incorporate India in its wider design to subjugate the resource-rich Central Asia and the Middle East—regions of growing inter-imperialist rivalry.

In a significant press statement on January 5, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that her department planned to bring India and Pakistan under a single bureau, which will also oversee US affairs in Central Asia. "One of the things we did in the State Department was to

move the Central Asian republics out of the European Bureau, which really was an artifact of their having been states of the Soviet Union, and to move them into the bureau that is South Asia which has Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. That whole South Asia region I expect to be very high on my list of priorities. Enhancing the relationship with India will be extremely important.”

This new strategic relationship with the US is a major shift in New Delhi. For most of the period since formal independence in 1947, the Indian National Congress has dominated the political scene in India. Prior to the late 1990s, it was out of power for just two brief periods—in late 1970s and late 1980s. With the help of the two Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)—Congress postured as anti-imperialist and even socialist to hoodwink the working class and the poor, while presiding over a highly-regulated capitalist economy.

Stalinist parties exposed

The collapse of the Soviet Union closed the door on all the anti-imperialist pretenses of bourgeois nationalist regimes in countries like India. In a political resolution adopted last year, the CPI-M accused the previous Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of “subordinating India to the global strategic interests of US, provided India was given de facto recognition as a nuclear power”. It recommended that the UPA government “promote multi-polarity in international relations” and “have close ties with Russia, China, Europe and Japan”.

The CPI-M Stalinists are not against imperialism as such. They advocate manoeuvring between the different imperialist powers to further the national interests of Indian capitalism. Already the Singh government has exposed the CPI-M’s efforts to paint Congress as more progressive by taking the very path that the Hindu supremacist BJP was condemned for. That has not deterred the Stalinists from doing everything possible to prevent the working class making a complete political break from Congress.

One event last November glaringly exposed the CPI-M’s pseudo-opposition to Indo-US political and military relations. Joint exercises between the Indian and US air forces were to be held in West Bengal where the CPI-M holds power at the state level. As a face-saving measure, the CPI-M called a protest to mark the arrival of US warplanes.

Concerned that the protest could become a rallying point for mass anti-US sentiment, Prime Minister Singh called up the West Bengal’s Chief Minister Buddhadeb Chattarjee and demanded it be called off. Despite Buddhadeb’s declaration that everything would be kept under control, Singh insisted that state governments had no right to interfere in defence matters and threatened to place West Bengal under direct rule. The CPI-M capitulated, scaled down the protest and pledged not to interfere in any way with the joint exercises.

These developments reveal not only the growing alliance between New Delhi and Washington but also the tacit support of the Stalinist parties for that alliance.

Foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. We have heard in other reports to this meeting how the aggressive neo-colonial policy of the Bush administration is intertwined with destroying the democratic rights and living standards of the working people in America. The same is true of India.

The development of the globalised economy sounded the death knell of nationalist projects all over the world, including that of the regulated national economy in India. It is no accident that the year that the Soviet Union was dissolved, 1991, was the same year that Congress began

opening up India to foreign investment. And in the Narasimha Rao government, which started the process, the finance minister was none other than the current prime minister, Manmohan Singh.

In 1998, the BJP capitalised on the growing opposition to “market reform” to win power, but then implemented the IMF-dictated restructuring program even more vigorously than Congress. To disorient and divide working people, the BJP heightened its Hindu supremacist campaigns, but it failed to contain growing popular hostility. At the 2004 election, to the shock and surprise of the Indian establishment, voters rejected the BJP’s “India Shining” campaign. For all but a narrow layer of the middle class, the much-vaunted market reforms had produced a decline in living standards.

During the 2004 election, to disguise Congress’s commitment to implement the economic restructuring, the CPI-M painted Congress as the “secular” and “anti-imperialist” alternative to the BJP. This was despite Congress’s long record of communal politics and thus fostering Hindu supremacist movements, stemming right back to the partition of India along communal lines in 1947 and the subsequent bloodbath.

The CPI-M claimed that at least the program of market reform would have “a human face” under Congress. Stalinist union bureaucrats busied themselves reminding workers of the harsh anti-union and anti-strike measures adopted by the Tamil Nadu government in July 2003 to summarily sack 200,000 workers—all with the blessing of the BJP government in New Delhi.

Now, however, the CPI-M is playing a pioneering role in imposing a strike ban in the states where it has political control. West Bengal has taken the lead. After a visit to China and Singapore, Chief Minister Battacharjee announced a grand plan to establish Information Technology Zones in his state. When prospective investors complained that industrial action could be an impediment, he immediately declared that the IT sectors would be made totally strike-free.

Speaking to representatives of the IT industry, Battacharjee said: “This menace [of strikes] 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 level.” His comments followed a one-day, all-India strike on September 29 called by the Left Front, which includes the CPI-M. “As far as the IT companies are concerned, I can say that they experienced the last strike on September 29,” Battacharjee assured his audience.

For over two decades, the CPI-M has retained power in West Bengal, mainly due to their land reforms, which provided some assistance to poor peasants. In other states, “land reform” has been manipulated for the benefit of the large land owners. Now, however, the land previously distributed to landless Bengali peasants is being retrieved to establish free enterprise zones for transnational corporations.

The Stalinist parties have played a crucial role both in shackling the Indian working class through their trade unions and in defusing rebellious peasant movements through limited land reform. Increasingly, however, the role of these parties in suppressing any genuine anti-capitalist movement among working people in the industrial centres, as well as in the rural areas, is being exposed.

Although India’s gross domestic product has grown by an average of 6 percent during the past five years, the living conditions of working people have not improved. About 400 million people, or nearly 40 percent of the population, still live on less than one dollar a day. About 60 percent have an income of less than two dollars a day.

Market reform has dramatically increased social polarisation in India, creating billionaires at one pole of society and tens of millions living in abject poverty at the other. The UPA government has made “sell India” its motto. Foreign direct investment in India is still relatively small compared to China. To meet its targets, the UPA will be compelled to undercut China and make even deeper inroads into the social position of working

people.

Addressing an Indian Economic Summit in early December, Finance Minister P. Chidambaram explained: “We are committed to efficiency in infrastructure development. But China does it with ruthless efficiency.... What we lack is the killer instinct and/or the ruthless efficiency which China has.” He said India had to “exploit its single biggest advantage ... an educated and young work force that is growing.” The government has estimated that India needs \$US150 billion over the next 10 years for infrastructure development alone.

Like the UPA government, the Stalinist parties are mesmerised by the Chinese example. After visiting China, a senior CPI-M bureaucrat declared: “West Bengal, with inherent sectoral strengths and a strong government commitment to invite investments into the state, is poised for a great economic leap forward. The Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of India-Marxist have a shared belief in market socialism. Economic synergies and a common political belief make for the ideal partnership.”

These developments underscore the importance of our work. We must deepen and increase the volume of our analysis on economic, social and political developments in South Asia as the basis for expanding our political influence throughout this critical region.

A socialist strategy

As part of our internationalist struggle for a United Socialist Republics of South Asia, we advance a socialist program for the working class in Sri Lanka. On this island, all the unresolved social and democratic problems found in every historically backward country have taken a particularly acute form in the country’s long drawn-out civil war.

At the last presidential election in November, only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) provided a program for the working class to intervene independently to stop the war. The platforms of all the other left and middle class radical parties—each of which claims to be different—supported “peace plans” of one or other of the two main bourgeois parties. The SEP’s campaign based on a working class solution to the war attracted a significant interest from working people and youth from both the Sinhala and Tamil communities.

Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) formed alliances with the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and won the election on the narrowest margin ever. His vote was just 50.02 percent. His main rival Ranil Wickremesinghe stood as a “peace” candidate, but inspired no enthusiasm. The failure of the so-called peace process initiated by Wickremesinghe as prime minister between 2002 and 2004 together with his open advocacy of the IMF’s market reforms sealed his fate at the polls.

Events since the election have vindicated the SEP’s warnings. We explained that whichever bourgeois candidate was elected the drive towards renewed war would continue. As soon as the poll was over, a shadow war in the North and East of the island has intensified. The death toll over the last two months has been more than 200, including cadres of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), armed forces personnel and innocent civilians. The situation is one of undeclared war.

Despite international pressure to resume negotiations, peace talks have been stalled for more than two and a half years. Every attempt to restart the peace process has been undermined by Sinhala chauvinist campaigns and provocations by sections of the military. Neither of the two main bourgeois parties is able or willing to rein in these reactionary forces as they are steeped in communal politics from head to foot. Even if talks

begin, it will only be a brief interlude to the next round of fighting.

The anti-Tamil war was the logical outcome of the communal discrimination perpetrated by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie since independence in 1948. Confronted with a powerful movement of the working class, bourgeois politicians have repeatedly whipped up Sinhala chauvinism to set working people against each other. With the turn to market reform in late 1970s, this policy of divide and rule was intensified and led directly to civil war in 1983.

The ability of the ruling class to play the communal card was greatly enhanced by the historic betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) which, along with the Stalinist Communist Party, entered a bourgeois SLFP-led government in 1964. By joining with the SLFP, the LSSP blocked any independent political movement of the working class, helped to divide Sinhala and Tamil workers and gave the bourgeoisie a free hand in stirring up chauvinist sentiment. This betrayal led to emergence of openly communal parties among radicalised youth—the JVP among the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie and the LTTE among their Tamil counterparts.

Neither the JVP nor the LTTE offer any progressive solution to the lack of democratic rights and decent social conditions among the toiling masses. On the contrary, they are developing more and more in a fascistic direction and pose a grave threat to the working people.

We do not propose an easy solution. The working class must take a bold independent initiative as the only social force that can solve the long outstanding democratic and social problems. The working class must fight for its own peace plan as opposed to the peace fraud proposed by the imperialist powers for their own reasons. This must be part of a far broader international strategy for the socialist transformation, not only of the island, but of South Asia and the world.



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