

West Bengal state elections: Left Front lurches further right

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The Left Front's campaign to win re-election in West Bengal, India's third most populous state, has exemplified its role as a political prop and servant of the Indian bourgeoisie.

Led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM], the Left Front is seeking to win a seventh-consecutive term as West Bengal's state government by exploiting residual popular illusions in its claims to be pro-toiler and socialist, even while pledging to the Indian bourgeoisie that it will press forward with economic restructuring.

The Left Front has made the pivot of its election campaign the call for industrialization—a euphemism for making West Bengal a cheap-labor cog in the manufacturing, research and business-processing operations of Indian and international capital.

“The industrialists have realized that the Left Front government is an investment-friendly government,” boasted West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Bhuddhadeb Bhattacharjee in a press interview last month. “Several industrial houses have come to Bengal, and more are coming. ... We are engaged in the task of development within a capitalist structure.”

In pursuit of investment, West Bengal's Left Front government has relaxed labor standards and effectively banned strikes in the state's information technology and business-processing sectors, given the green light to the expropriation of small farmers so that their lands can be used for private industrial development, and sought to win the confidence of international-lending agencies by contracting out public sector jobs and curbing social spending.

In the first four decades following independence, the CPM and its main Left Front partner, the Communist Party of India, justified their support for India's state-led national development strategy on the grounds that the “anti-imperialist” sections of the national bourgeoisie had to be supported against the pro-imperialist wing and feudal reaction. Now, in an even cruder perversion of Marxism, the Stalinists claim, citing China as their model, that the path to

socialism lies through West Bengal's transformation into a cheap labor magnet for international capital.

“I am trying,” said Bhattacharjee, “to work accepting the present reality...[S]ince we are practical, we know it is wise to be capitalist at the moment when the whole world is wooing capitalism”.

The Left Front government is particularly concerned at dispelling the notion of West Bengal as a center of worker militancy. Bhattacharjee made a point of reporting for work last September 29, when the unions and Left Front staged a one-day strike to protest the economic policies of the central government, and he angrily denounced workers whose protests crippled the operations of Kolkata's IT sector that day, vowing his government will ensure no like disruption ever occurs again.

The Left Front's “development model” stresses the need for “harmonious relations” between management and labor, Bhattacharjee told a meeting at the Calcutta Press Club April 13. “It is not the management's responsibility alone to run industry, but labourers should also co-operate so that disputes are settled through discussions. I can't encourage militant trade unionism and shut down factories.”

Among the Left Front government's main arguments in wooing investors is that it can better ensure “labor peace” than other state governments, because of its close ties to the trade union apparatus. But when the labor bureaucracy has proven unable to quell worker militancy, the West Bengal Left Front regime has not shied away from using police repression, a point Bhattacharjee himself made when speaking to a business audience in Mumbai last August. After denouncing those who know only how “to formulate a charter of demands, raise slogans and disturb production,” Bhattacharjee declared, “We have acted firmly by calling in police when the unions turned militant at Bata and a Pepsi factory.”

According to the corporate media, there is strong support for the Left Front government's re-election in business circles. An April 26 Reuters report gave the example of a real estate developer, Pradip Chopra, whose business has

grown tenfold in the last five years. “I am comfortable with this government and will support it,” said Chopra. “They have changed Kolkata’s image of a dying city to one that is vibrant and a happening place to invest.” Another businessman, Rajat Kandoi, a partner in a company that does overseas business-processing, told Reuters, “I never dreamed I would vote for the Communists. But this time, I would like this government to return to power.”

A poll conducted by the Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the results of which were released last month, rated West Bengal the third most attractive state in which to invest, after Gujarat and Maharashtra. More than half of the ICC’s respondents termed the Left Front government’s performance in respect to “industrialization and the creation of a congenial business environment” good, while 78 percent lauded the measures that Chief Minister Bhattacharjee has taken to boost business confidence.

The CPM and Left Front leaders themselves admit that they are courting business support. Jyoti Basu, who served as the West Bengal’s chief minister from 1977 to 2001, told a rally, “So far, we have won election on the strength of the poor’s vote. Now, we want votes from every stratum of the society.”

“Left turns right in Bengal’s biz belt,” exclaimed an April 25 CNN-IBN report. It pointed to Narayan Jain, the Left Front’s candidate for the Chowringhee constituency, as symbolic “of the Left’s growing clout among business leaders and professionals.” His “core group of supporters are all businessmen”

Jain, adds the report, “pushes an unabashed pro-reform, pro-business line. His main concern is to make West Bengal safe for business. ‘The laws which are not relevant today, should be scrapped. And after the new government comes, we will take that initiative,’ he says.”

Led by the CPM, the Left Front is also playing a critical role at the all-India level in supporting the Indian bourgeoisie in imposing its neo-liberal program of privatization, deregulation, and the gutting of worker rights and farmer-price supports. The Left Front’s 60-plus MPs are providing the minority, Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition with the votes needed to sustain it in office, while working to contain the mass opposition to the growth of economic insecurity and social inequality within the confines of trade union and parliamentary protests.

In the West Bengal elections, which have been held in five phases ending today, the Left Front has been opposed by two, rival multi-party alliances.

The split in the opposition virtually guarantees the Left Front will be re-elected to an unprecedented seventh-term and is indicative of the general satisfaction of big business

and the ruling elite with the current government.

The first alliance is led by the Trinamool Congress, a split-off from the Congress Party of Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and includes the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Although the BJP is the second largest party in India’s national parliament, it is only a marginal player in West Bengal politics.

The Trinamool or “grassroots” Congress (TMC) is led by Mamata Bannerjee, a populist demagogue who makes Bengali-chauvinist and strident anti-communist appeals, while trying to exploit popular anger over some of the anti-worker and anti-poor actions of the Left Front government. In the late 1990s, Bannerjee’s TMC became the focus of an attempt on the part of sections of big business to oust the Left Front government, which was perceived as insufficiently supportive of economic restructuring. But her stock has fallen as the Left Front has moved right and as sections of West Bengal’s urban middle class have benefited from the growth in India’s economy.

The Congress, which heads an eight-party [West Bengal] United Democratic Alliance, spurned Bannerjee’s pleas for a *mahajot* or grand anti-Left alliance. Sections of the West Bengal Congress party apparatus were inclined to accept Bannerjee’s offer, but the all-India party leadership would not hear of it.

Publicly the Congress justified its refusal to ally with the TMC on the grounds that Bannerjee would not break her ties with the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance. Clearly this was a factor, since any alliance with the BJP would undermine the Congress’ posture as a progressive, secular party.

But even more importantly, an electoral alliance with the TMC would have constituted a threat to the continued existence of West Bengal’s Left Front government, which provides the Stalinists with much of their leverage in official politics. By allowing the return to power of West Bengal’s Left Front government with only token opposition, the Congress leadership has smoothed the way for retaining the Left’s pivotal support for the UPA government at the Center.



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