

In response to intensifying class antagonisms

India's Congress Party revives discredited "Garibi Hatao" slogan

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India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has decided to revive the populist electoral slogan "*Garibi Hatao*" (eliminate poverty), first popularized by Indira Gandhi during the 1971 parliamentary elections, in the hope that it can provide political cover for a new wave of neo-liberal reforms.

In particular, the UPA government is intent on throwing open public infrastructure projects to private capital, gutting restrictions on layoffs and plant closures, introducing "market-pricing" for electricity, privatizing public sector companies, and establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs), modeled after those in China, in which companies enjoy tax holidays, strikes are effectively prohibited, and standard labor and environmental regulations are waived.

No sooner had the UPA cabinet decided to place "*Garibi Hatao*" at the center of the government's propaganda than Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other key ministers left for a series of big business functions at which they pledged to intensify the pace of economic "reform." (See India's prime minister pledges to accelerate neo-liberal "reform")

Let there be any confusion within business circles as to what the Congress leadership intends by resurrecting a slogan that Indira Gandhi employed in the early 1970s when she postured as a socialist, Congress and government spokesman have stipulated that

"*Garibi Hatao*" is to be the first point in a revised "Twenty-Point" [Congress] Program (TPP) that will be updated "with particular reference to economic reforms, liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy".

The revised TPP-2006 is to become operational in April 2007, which, as *The Hindustan Times* observed, is "almost [coincident] with the [state assembly] election campaigns in Punjab, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh." The latter state is home to almost 15 percent of India's population and far and away the largest in the Indian Union.

But the Congress's revival of "*Garibi Hatao*" is not just a matter of electoral calculations.

The Congress and UPA are involved in a precarious and increasingly untenable balancing act, posing as a party

concerned with the *aam admi* (common person), while implementing neo-liberal socio-economic reforms, massively increasing military spending, and seeking to fashion a strategic partnership with US imperialism.

To its great surprise, the Congress-led UPA was propelled to power in the 2004 elections after it made a calibrated appeal to popular discontent over the increasing unemployment, economic insecurity, and human suffering that have resulted from the neo-liberal program. Predictably, the Congress' promise of "reforms with human face" has proven to be a cruel hoax. The UPA government has pursued an economic and geo-political agenda that is all but a carbon copy of that implemented by its predecessor, the National Democratic Alliance, a coalition led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party.

Recent weeks have seen mounting social unrest over the plans of the Union and state governments to expropriate hundreds of thousands of peasants, so that their land can be handed over at little or no cost to big business in the form of Special Economic Zones.

As a sop to the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front, on which it is dependent for its parliamentary majority, the UPA recently inaugurated a National Rural Employment Guarantee Program (NREGP) under which the state is legally obliged to provide one member of every rural household in the country's 200 poorest districts 100 days of work per year. Pay rates may vary, but are generally around 60 rupees (\$1.33) per day.

This measure is a band-aid under conditions where rural India is hemorrhaging. In May the UPA Minister of Agriculture conceded that between 1998 and 2003 more than 100,000 peasant farmers were driven by mounting debts and onerous interest payments to commit suicide. No less striking is the fact that four-fifths of rural Indians—a group constituting about half of India's total population—have experienced a fall in their per capita consumption since 1989-90.

But Finance Ministry officials have made it clear that even the minimal increase in social spending caused by the Employment Guarantee and a handful of other "pro-poor"

initiatives may be unsustainable due to mounting government deficits.

Big business meanwhile is demanding the government accelerate the pace of neo-liberal reform.

The Congress-led UPA is anxious to do just that. According to press reports, Manmohan Singh and the neo-liberal ideologues who hold the UPA government's economic portfolios calculate that they have a 12-15 month "window" to enact major reforms before the government's agenda will be dominated by preparations for the general election slated for 2009.

The revival of *Garibi Hatao* is thus a transparent attempt to throw dust in the eyes of India's toiling masses. The more faithfully it implements the agenda of big business, the more the Congress-led UPA resorts to pro-poor demagoguery.

The Congress is the historic and traditional governing party of the Indian national bourgeoisie. Its chief utility has been its ability to use anti-imperialist and socialist verbiage to bind the masses to the program of Indian capital.

But this deception has become increasingly difficult to sustain and more and more dependent on the support lent it by the Stalinist-led Left Front, which claims the Congress is more amenable to mass pressure than the BJP and a secular bulwark against the Hindu right.

It is a measure of the political bankruptcy, even desperation, of the Congress leadership that in trying to refurbish its tattered credentials as "a party of the people" it has resorted to reviving Indira Gandhi's slogan of *Garibi Hatao*.

As the *Deccan Chronicle* noted, "Congress leaders do not realise the pitfalls inherent in their move. ... Adoption of Banish Poverty slogan will be admitting that the Congress has failed to eradicate this scourge even 35 years after embarking on the mission."

Moreover, while the *Garibi Hatao* slogan and an associated program of limited reforms did initially prove politically rewarding to Indira Gandhi, they failed utterly to contain class antagonisms in India. Three years after she effected a "left turn" under the banner of *Garibi Hatao*, Gandhi was employing India's security forces to break a strike of railway workers and the following year she suspended the constitution under the Emergency.

By the latter half of the 1960s the Congress Party's post-independence model of national economic development was in crisis, provoking both an upsurge of worker, student and peasant struggles and a push from sections of Indian big business and the old landlord-princely elite through the Swatantra Party and the Jana Sangh (forerunner of the BJP) for a sharp shift right in economic and foreign policy.

Widespread poverty and hunger and popular demands for social reform had caused the Congress to suffer steep losses in the 1967 general elections. These losses in turn exacerbated a struggle for power within the Congress.

Between 1969 and 1971, Indira Gandhi was able to lead a

rebel faction of the Congress in wresting leadership from a corrupt and increasingly conservative old guard by posturing as the protector of India's poor and by convincing India's elite that the Congress, because of its association with the independence struggle and ability to maneuver with the Stalinist Communist Parties, was the best vehicle through which to contend with growing popular social discontent.

It was during this period that Indira Gandhi and her advisors coined the *Garibi Hatao* slogan and utilized it in gaining an overwhelming electoral victory in the 1971 parliamentary elections.

The slogan was not simply propaganda. Gandhi did introduce a series of popular reforms such as bank nationalization, increasing the budgetary allocation for the poor, and stripping India's former princely rulers of their state stipends.

But rather than financing her anti-poverty measures through income redistribution by taxing the wealthy, she resorted to deficit financing, much of it made possible through an expansion of the money supply. In other words, Gandhi sought not to antagonize the party's capitalist patrons, while at the same time attempting to placate India's toilers.

The purchasing power transferred to the poor was not matched by an increase in grain supply, leading to soaring price inflation and grain hoarding by merchants. Then in 1973, India's economy was hit by the world oil price shock.

By 1974, Indira Gandhi was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a rescue-loan.

The Indian economy was thus in grave crisis by 1974-75, fueling an explosive eruption of the class struggle which increasingly turned against the Congress government itself. A strike wave culminated in a weeks-long nationwide railway strike that at its height involved more than a million workers.

Although Gandhi was able to successfully break the strike by mobilizing the army, her government continued to be challenged from both the left and right. In 1975 and with the support of the Stalinist Communist Party of India, she declared the Emergency, under which basic democratic rights were suspended, the working class ruthlessly suppressed, and more than 100,000 opponents of the government jailed.

Coincident with the turn to the IMF and imposition of authoritarian rule, Gandhi and the Congress leadership thought it politic to drop *Garibi Hatao* as a central slogan.

Thirty years on, it can be safely said that UPA government will not be able to contain the growth of explosive class antagonisms by reviving a discredited populist campaign slogan.



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