

Millions to join one-day, all-India general strike

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Millions of workers across India will participate today in a one-day, nationwide general strike called by the Left Front-aligned Trade Union Sponsoring Committee to oppose the neo-liberal policies of India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

The strike is testimony to mounting popular opposition in both the city and countryside to privatization, deregulation, corporate tax cuts, the dismantling of public and social services and agricultural price supports, and the diversion of public funds from agriculture to business-backed infrastructure projects—i.e., to the program all Indian governments, Union and state, have pursued since 1991.

But if the progressive potential of this mounting opposition is to be realized, it is necessary for socialists to bluntly state what is: Today's protest is not aimed at developing an independent political movement of the working class to challenge the bourgeoisie and its plans to make India a center of cheap-labor manufacturing, business-processing, and research for the world capitalist market. Rather it is a maneuver on the part of the Left Front, a parliamentary alliance dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] and its sister Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India [CPI].

This maneuver has a double-purpose: to shackle the working class to the UPA, which depends for its survival on the Left Front's parliamentary support and to provide a political cover for the Left's Front's own role in imposing the economic "reform" program of big business in the three states where, under various labels, it forms the government—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura.

On September 29, 2005, more than 60 million workers and toilers participated in a similar national strike.

Since then, the Congress Party-led UPA government has accelerated the pace of neo-liberal "reform." It has thrown open the retail sector—the country's second largest employer—to foreign investment, initiated Special Economic Zones where companies are to enjoy massive tax concessions and where normal work standards and worker-rights are to be waived, and pressed forward with plans to rewrite the country's labor laws so as to make it easier for companies to contract-out work, layoff workers, and close plants.

In pursuit of a "strategic partnership" with US imperialism, the UPA has toed the Bush administration's line on Iran's nuclear program and made only the lamest criticism of Israel for last summer's invasion and carpet-bombing of Lebanon. Under the UPA, the Indian state spends less than 1 percent of GNP on health care and barely 3 percent on education, while pouring billions into the military build-up that the corporate and political elite views as vital to securing India "world-power" status.

Yet now, no less than 15 months ago, the Stalinists insist that there is no question of withdrawing their support for the UPA government.

Declares CPI leader Gurudas Dasgupta, "We want to bring the government to its senses."

The real character of the Left Front and its relations with big business have been demonstrated by recent events in West Bengal.

West Bengal Chief Minister and CPI (M) Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee has vowed to use the police and courts to ensure that the strike in no way impacts on the state's burgeoning information technology (IT) and information technology-enabled service (ITES) sector and successfully pressed the CPM-affiliated Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) to abandon a plan to stage a token walkout of a small number of IT-ITES workers.

On Tuesday, Bhattacharjee told the press, "As far as I know, no one in the IT sector will join or observe the strike. No one from outside, or any outsider, will be allowed to do any picketing in front of IT offices. No one will be allowed to prevent anyone from joining work. Such things will not be tolerated by the government."

The Left Front government, added Bhattacharjee, will assist in arranging transport for IT-ITES workers, since public transport will be paralyzed by the strike.

The IT-ITES bosses complained vehemently after the one-day strike in 2005 disrupted their operations. Bhattacharjee, who has openly proclaimed his government's commitment to placating investors, responded by publicly pledging that no similar disruption will ever be allowed in West Bengal.

The corporate media has lavished great attention on whether Bhattacharjee will fulfill his pledge, seeing it as a crucial test of the Left Front's readiness to enforce the dictates of capital.

In 2002, the West Bengal government became the first state government in India to declare the IT-ITES sector a public utility, a designation which greatly restricts workers rights, including the right to strike. In the run-up today's protest, Jyoti Basu, the CPM senior statesman and former West Bengal Chief Minister, has been urging that the restrictions on worker rights in the IT-ITES sector be further tightened by declaring it an "emergency service." Such a designation would effectively make all work stoppages illegal.

Recent weeks have also seen West Bengal's Left Front government using the repressive powers of the state to stamp out protests against the expropriation of prime agricultural land so that it can be sold off at a bargain price to the multinational automaker Tata Motors. The government invoked Section 144 of the Criminal Code, a draconian law crafted by the British colonial state, to outlaw all meetings and protests in the environs of Singur and to ban "outsiders" from visiting the town. Then it unleashed the police against those, including poor peasants and sharecroppers, who were protesting the expropriation.

These actions of the ostensibly "Marxist" West Bengal government

lend critical political legitimacy to the offensive the Indian bourgeoisie has mounted on worker rights through the judiciary. Time and again, over the past decade the courts have issued rulings expanding managerial powers and illegalizing strikes and other forms of popular protest.

Among the demands being raised by the unions in today's strike is that the Indian government take legislative action to reverse a 2003 Supreme Court ruling that public sector workers, and possibly all workers, have no constitutionally-protected right to strike.

The CPM and CPI justify their propping up of a coalition led by the Congress—the historic party of the Indian bourgeoisie—with the claim that it is susceptible to mass pressure. As evidence of this, they point to the government's ostensible program, the National Common Minimum Program (CMP), which was drawn up with the Stalinists' assistance in the days immediately following the UPA's May 2004 election victory.

The CMP is an elaboration on the Congress's 2004 election slogan of neo-liberal "reforms but with a human face." It is based on the lie that is possible to reconcile the program of capital—India's transformation into a magnet for international capital and the rapid conversion of its agricultural sector into agribusiness—with the needs of the working class and toilers.

Historically, the crucial service that the Congress has performed for the bourgeoisie is to harness the masses behind its class strategy, through limited reforms and populist rhetoric. But the regime of Indira Gandhi came into a headlong collision with the working class in the mid-1970s. In the race for profits and investment, the bourgeoisie, in India as around the world, has in the ensuing three decades systematically repudiated social-welfare policies, leaving an electorally weakened Congress to spout empty phrases about its concern for the poor. Only the Stalinist-led Left Front echoes and embellishes them.

Although big business is constantly urging the government to accelerate the pace of neo-liberal reform, the Stalinist-backed UPA, as evidenced in the editorial pages of both the Indian and international press, continues to enjoy the confidence of Indian and international capital.

For their part, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, are acutely aware of the distress that reigns in much of rural India and the role that the Left Front is playing in deflecting and derailing popular opposition to the government's agenda. That is why they continuously insist on the need to consult the Stalinists, publicly extol the value of their advice, and give them an occasional sop or, at least, make policy reversals that have the appearance of sops. A case in point is the privatization of India's most profitable and strategically significant public sector corporations, the so-called *navaratna* (nine gem) companies, which include India's largest energy utilities. Given the growing geo-political importance of the energy sector, many sections of Indian capital came to question the wisdom of selling-off the *navaratna* companies.

Forced to concede that the UPA has move steadily right during its two and a half years in office, the Stalinists advance a second argument as to why it must be sustained in office: propping up the Congress-led UPA is the only way to block the return to power of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In fact, it is no more possible to defend democratic rights and fight communal reaction through the Congress, than it is to oppose the neo-liberal program of the bourgeoisie—both require the independent political mobilization of the working class.

It was the Congress that joined hands with the British and the Muslim League in 1947 to suppress the anti-imperialist struggle and partition India along communal lines.

Whilst claiming to uphold secularism, the Congress has stoked a Hindu-chauvinist laden, anti-Pakistani Indian nationalism ever since and it has repeatedly connived with the Hindu supremacist right. The results of this are graphically illustrated by the recent report of the government-appointed Sachar Committee into the socio-economic condition of India's 140 million Muslims. The report found that the Muslims constitute a grossly socially disadvantaged group—second only to the most historically oppressed groups (the Dalits and tribals)—and an increasingly persecuted minority.

The growth of the BJP and various casteist parties in the 1980s, as the Congress's national bourgeois economic strategy began to unravel, was not inevitable. If such forces were able to come to the fore it was because for decades the Stalinists supported the bourgeoisie's nationalist economic strategy, claiming that it constituted a necessary part of the "democratic revolution", and politically confined the working class to trade union struggles and electoral politics that revolved around aligning with the Congress or a rival bourgeois formation like the Janata Party.

Now the Stalinists argue that to fight communal reaction the working class must prop up a Congress-led government that is implementing a socially incendiary neo-liberal reform program and increasingly allying India with US imperialism.

Workers and socialist-minded youth and intellectuals must reject this course and undertake the struggle to build a new mass revolutionary socialist party.

The allies of India's workers and oppressed are the workers of the world, who everywhere confront globally-organized capital. Capitalist globalization and the associated recrudescence of militarism and imperialist war are producing the objective conditions for, and the necessity of, the working class mobilizing as a self-conscious international force in struggle against capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system.

Indian workers must place themselves at the head of all the oppressed. The liquidation of casteism, landlordism, and all the legacies of imperialist oppression and feudal backwardness will be accomplished through a socialist transformation carried out by the Indian working class in alliance with the world working class, not by chasing the Stalinist mirage of a "progressive" national bourgeoisie.

It is for this international socialist program that the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Party founded by Leon Trotsky in opposition to the Stalinist betrayal of the 1917 Russian Revolution, fight.



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