

West Bengal Left Front's pro-investor land grab results in deadly clashes

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West Bengal's Left Front government has temporarily suspended its policy of expropriating large tracts of agricultural land on behalf of domestic and foreign investors after violent clashes erupted at Nandigram that resulted in up to a dozen fatalities.

Situated in East Midnapore District, Nandigram has been designated by the Left Front government as the site of a 14,500-acre Special Economic Zone (SEZ) that is to be given over to the Salim Group, an Indonesian conglomerate notorious for its close ties to the former Suharto dictatorship. There are also plans for infrastructure projects and a second Salim Group SEZ that require the state government to commandeer a further 12-15,000 acres in East Midnapore.

Villagers in Nandigram rose up in protest in early January after the local Haldia Development Authority served notice that it was beginning the process of expropriating land for the proposed SEZ. Some local cadres of Left Front-affiliated parties joined the protest movement, which quickly assumed a mass character. Villagers blockaded roads and bridges and clashed with police, who mounted lathi-charges and opened fire with live ammunition. (The lathi is a long wooden stick, usually made of bamboo, used as a weapon.)

There were also angry altercations between villagers and local officials of the Communist Party of India Marxist [CPI (M)]—the dominant partner in the Left Front—and many of the latter fled the area. On January 4 the local CPI (M) office was torched.

The violence climaxed on the night of January 6-7, when, according to press reports and villagers' accounts, 250 CPI (M) toughs, some of them dressed in police uniforms, organized a counterattack aimed at reasserting the governing party's authority in the area. The attack ended around 7:30 a.m. on the 7th, when a crowd of 10,000 villagers gathered and chased the CPI (M) cadres away. However, the violence of the previous night had left six opponents of the government land-seizure scheme dead and more than two dozen injured.

Several CPM members were also killed during the nearly week-long uprising in Nandigram. A CPI (M) statement puts the number at six.

Police were noticeably absent throughout the night of January 6-7, which strongly suggests that they were instructed by

government officials or influential CPM leaders to stand down.

The Stalinist CPI (M) has previously used strong-arm tactics against opponents on both the right and left and done so with the connivance of West Bengal's police authorities. One of India's five most populous states, West Bengal has been ruled by the CPI (M)-led Left Front since 1977.

While the CPI (M) leadership would later be compelled to change tack, its initial response was to denounce the Nandigram protests as a provocation engineered by "outsiders," including the right-wing Trinamool Congress and Naxhalites (Maoists). Benoy Konar, a senior CPI (M) Central Committee member and prominent leader of its Kisan (peasant) Front, exhorted party cadres to confront the Nandigram protest movement and match the defiant villagers "gun for gun and lathi for lathi."

West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's first reaction to the events of January 6-7 was to term them as "regrettable," but he didn't criticize the conduct of the police or the CPM party workers involved in the fighting in Nandigram, nor offer any apology to the families of the dead. CPI (M) State Secretary Birman Bose and other top government and party officials, meanwhile, claimed that there was no truth to the villagers' assertions that state authorities had initiated the process of seizing their land, charging that the protests had been whipped up by outsiders through the spreading of lies.

Two days later Bhattacharjee adopted a different public posture, declaring that "the government had committed a blunder"—a blunder that it was "the principal cause of the mayhem that followed"—and ordering the district magistrate to "tear ... to pieces" the land acquisition notice issued by the Haldia Development Authority "and keep quiet for some time."

Bhattacharjee said he was initiating a "political process to defuse the tension" and promised that no land would be acquired by the state on behalf of the Salim Group before "taking everybody into confidence."

But he also made clear that Left Front government will press forward with its drive to "industrialise" West Bengal by offering investors cheap land and tax and other concessions and by curbing labor militancy. Otherwise, said Bhattacharjee, "Bengal will go backward."

Bhattacharjee's act of contrition was a patent attempt to stanch a major political crisis. While the CPI (M) is imposing neo-liberal economic reforms in West Bengal and propping up a right-wing Congress Party-led coalition government at the Center, it still poses as a Marxist party and an advocate for India's toilers.

In the final months of 2006 as the SEZ issue became a matter of increasing public concern across India, the three other major component parties of the Left Front—the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party—publicly voiced reservations over the West Bengal government's rush to seize land on behalf of big business, complaining that deals have been struck without their knowledge. And with the events at Nandigram providing a graphic demonstration of the lengths to which the CPI (M) is ready to go in enforcing the dictates of capital, they felt compelled to criticize, albeit timidly, the West Bengal government, for the lack of 'transparency' in the land acquisition process and the absence of firm guarantees for those whose land is being seized of secure employment and alternate housing.

Of greater political significance was the strong condemnation of the government in an open letter drafted by 14 prominent intellectuals and social activists, many of them, including the renowned historians Romila Thapar and Sumit Sarkar, long identified with the Left Front.

"We are deeply concerned," declared the letter, "about the escalating levels of violence being reported from Nandigram in West Bengal, as a consequence of the state government's policy of land acquisition for industrial use. TV reports from Calcutta indicate growing levels of tension and violence in the villages. This situation is likely to be repeated across the state if the policy continues to be executed as it has, without consideration for human rights, democratic procedures, and livelihoods."

Shaken by the depth of the popular anger in Nandigram, the CPI (M) has initiated a six-week propaganda campaign to promote its pre-investor industrialization policy

As part of this campaign, the CPI (M) is seeking to tar as "anti-development" all those opposed to its policy of expropriating peasants and stripping sharecroppers of their livelihood so as to woo big business. It is also claiming that the peasants of Nandigram were the dupes of an "unholy" anti-Left Front alliance of right-wing and communist parties and Naxhalite groups.

Certainly right-wing forces are trying to exploit the anxieties and anger of West Bengal's toilers for their own reactionary ends. In December, Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Bannerjee staged a 25-day hunger strike to oppose the state's seizure and handing over of 1000 acres of prime agricultural land near Singur to Tata Motors to build a car assembly plant.

In this she was given strong support from the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which pressed

forward with neo-liberal reforms when it was the dominant partner in the National Democratic Alliance coalition government that ruled India from 1998 to 2004. The BJP's and Trinamool Congress's Orissan allies, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), have brutally repressed a movement of tribal peoples resisting the seizure of their land so that Tata can build the Kalinga Nagar steel complex. (See "India: twelve protestors killed in police shooting")

The villagers of Nandigram and other places targeted by the West Bengal for expropriation have good reason not to trust the claims of the CPI (M)/Left Front that they will be adequately compensated for the loss of their livelihood and homes; still less the Left Front's claims that industrialization is being pursued in the interests of all.

As was the case state-led development, the aim of the bourgeoisie's current strategy of exploiting India's vast reserves of cheap labor to attract foreign capital and win global markets is to enrich and strengthen capital, not lift India's toiler's out of a life of poverty and insecurity.

The West Bengal Left Front government, like those formed by the Congress and BJP in the states and at the Center, has slashed public services and public sector jobs and restricted workers' rights to woo investors. And now it is using laws dating back to the British colonial regime to seize vast tracts of land and turn them over to Indian and foreign firms and ban all gatherings and protests in government-designated "disturbed areas."

India's corporate media has praised the Left Front government's decision to delay land expropriation in Nandigram. This reflects concern within the ruling class not just about the situation in West Bengal, but about the growing opposition in rural India to the land grab that is being carried out by big business under the Congress Party-led central government's recently adopted SEZ law.

In a twist that underlines the ever-widening gulf between the Left Front leadership and the masses whom they purport to represent, the big business and notoriously right-wing *Indian Express* cautioned Bhattacharjee about flaunting his indifference to the human impact of his "industrialization" policy. Declared a January 12 *Express* editorial: "It is not enough to hold out a vision. It is to be shared by those for whom it is envisioned. The real basis of consensus building for re-industrialization can be laid only when its leader is able to see his pet projects also through the eyes of its possible victims and not just through the lens of the investors."



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