

# West Bengal Stalinists' pro-business policies leading to "civil war"

## Prominent left-wing intellectuals warn

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A group of prominent left-wing intellectuals, several of them long-publicly identified as supporters of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM], has issued a report strongly condemning the West Bengal Left Front's policy of expropriating poor peasants so as to create investor-friendly Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

Based on a fact-finding mission that the intellectuals undertook to Nandigram and Singur, the prospective sites respectively of a massive Salim Group industrial complex and a Tata car-assembly plant, the report refutes CPM claims that the popular opposition to its "industrialisation" policy is a provocation mounted by right-wingers and Naxhalites (Maoists).

"This is a genuine and spontaneous people's movement and people are angry as they were not consulted and the amount of compensation is far below the market rate," Sumit Sarkar, an internationally renowned historian of modern India, told reporters after his visits to Singur and Nandigram.

In a joint statement, the intellectuals warned that the popular uprising that convulsed Nandigram in early January "is likely to be repeated across the state if the [industrialisation] policy continues to be executed as it has, without consideration for *human rights, democratic procedures and livelihoods*." [Emphasis added]

Sarkar, writer-political activist Arundathi Roy, Romila Thapar, an authority on the history of ancient India, and others felt compelled to speak out against the West Bengal government after CPM activists employed lethal violence January 7 in an attempt to suppress peasant opposition in Nandigram, which lies about 60 kilometres north of the state capital Kolkata (Calcutta).

After learning that the government had begun the process of expropriating their land, people from the Nandigram area chased several local CPM officials and cadres from their homes. Seeking revenge, a gang of 200 CPM supporters descended upon the village on the night of January 6-7, while the police, who are under the state government's authority, withdrew. In the ensuing melee at least six villagers were killed.

The CPM's use of thug-violence against the peasants of Nandigram had been preceded by the West Bengal government's invocation of legislation drafted by the British colonial-state to impose a blanket ban on all meetings and protests in Singur and to prohibit people from outside the area traveling to Singur.

The clash at Nandigram threw West Bengal's CPM-led Left

Front government into crisis. After first claiming that no government order had been issued to begin the expropriation process, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was forced to concede that government authorities had in fact begun to identify land for seizure and that "mistakes" had been made.

This admission has not, however, stopped the Stalinists from mounting a propaganda offensive aimed at depicting peasants opposed to its land seizure program as the dupes of "outside" agitators from the Trinamul Congress, a right-wing breakaway from the Congress party and an ally of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and various Naxhalite groups.

Wanting to uncover the truth, Sumit Sarkar, Supreme Court lawyer Colin Gonsalves, journalist Sumit Chakravarty, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) professor Tanika Sarkar and Krishna Majumdar of Delhi University (DU) undertook a "fact-finding" visit of Nandigram and Singur.

Their interim report puts the lie to the CPM's claims, while warning that the West Bengal government's drive to hand over large swathes of land to big business, for a nominal fee and without proper consultation and compensation, threatens to provoke "rural civil war."

Sumit Sarkar described the gratuitous brutality meted out to the villagers. "We met many people—men and also a large number of women—who had been beaten up, their injuries still visible, including an 80-year-old woman. What the villagers repeatedly alleged was that along with the police, and it seems more than the police, party activists, whom the villagers call 'cadres'—which has sadly become a term of abuse—did the major part of the beating up."

Continued Sarkar, "The West Bengal government seems determined to follow a particular path of development involving major concessions both to big capitalists like the Tatas and multinationals operating in SEZs."

Dr. Tanika Sarkar observed that peasants were, with good reason, not ready to put their faith in government claims that they will benefit from the cushy deals the state government has negotiated with Indian and foreign investors to woo them to West Bengal: "People are totally skeptical about industries providing uneducated people like them with jobs. Moreover, several other such projects at Haldia and Jellingham [dock and container

complex] have failed to do anything for displaced people.”

Shaken by the trenchant criticisms made by intellectuals who for the most part have long-been publicly identified with the CPM and the Left Front, the Stalinists have responded with lies and distortions.

The CPM is acutely aware that opposition to the practice of seizing large tracts of valuable agricultural land for SEZs is mounting across India. At the same time its attempts to convince investors that the government will make the state “business friendly” very much ride on its capacity to expropriate land.

CPM central committee member Benoy Konar, who is in charge of the land acquisition process, declared, “I can’t do anything if the historians decide to go back in time. A factory, whether in a socialist or a capitalist model, needs land.” West Bengal Commerce and Industry Minister Nirupam Sen sounded the same note saying, “If we were to agree to the historians’ views, no one would be able to acquire land anywhere in India.”

Other CPM leaders have claimed that their critics are “victims” of false propaganda and misinformation, prompting Arundhati Roy to declare, “I don’t think I am so stupid. I am not a puppet. I don’t think people like Sumit Sarkar are victims of any propaganda,”

Fearing that the peasant protests and the criticism of intellectuals will find an echo in their own ranks, the CPM leadership has let it be known that party members who criticise the West Bengal government’s “industrialisation policy” will face serious consequences.

If the CPM-led Left Front has been able to form West Bengal’s state government for the past 30 years, it is because it was able to consolidate a strong base of peasant support by implementing comprehensive land reform soon after coming to power. In its initial years in office, the Left Front regime also made various social-democratic type concessions to the organised working class, granting a modicum of job security and other benefits.

However, in lock step with the Indian bourgeoisie’s abandonment of its state-led development strategy and turn toward transforming India into a cheap-labor producer for the world capitalist market, the West Bengal government has moved ever rightward for the past 15 years. It now demands that the unions instill discipline so as to boost productivity and seizes land from poor peasants so it can be used for Special Economic Zones where capital will enjoy all manner of concessions and subsidies and traditional labor standards and rights will, in all likelihood, not apply.

Already the Left Front government has declared information-technology and IT-enabled industries a public utility, a designation which greatly restricts workers rights, including the right to strike.

On February 11 West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo Member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee told a rally organised by the CPM near Nandigram, “The people need to understand that the industrial process being initiated by the state government is irreversible and transition from agriculture to industry is an inevitable course.”

During a visit to Singur he told anti-Tata motors campaigner, “You can’t stop the car factory from coming up this way. The factory will definitely come up, and none can stop it.”

CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat, writing in the CPM

weekly *People’s Democracy*, attempted to answer the charge made by Sarkar and the other left-intellectuals that the CPM engages in “double-speak” when it postures as an opponent as the neo-liberal economic policies being pursued by the Congress-Party led United Progressive Alliance while implementing like policies in West Bengal.

“At the heart of the matter,” writes Karat, “is these critics’ inability to comprehend the role of a state government under India’s constitutional set-up and the CPI(M)’s understanding of what [state] governments headed by the Party can do.

“In the past decade and a half, the all-India policy of the CPI(M) has been to oppose the neo-liberal direction of policies, popularly termed liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. What is not recognised enough is that the state governments have to bear the brunt of such policies.”

According to Karat, because India’s constitution places the principal economic levers in the hands of the central government, West Bengal’s Left Front government is compelled to implement neo-liberal policies, to woo investors by attacking the working class and toilers. “West Bengal,” proclaims Karat, “will have the basic features of a liberalised capitalist economy. Those who believe that it can be otherwise are only deluding themselves.”

Excluded, of course, is any possibility of the CPM challenging India’s reactionary bourgeois constitution or placing the perks and privileges that come from controlling the West Bengal state government at risk.

The truth is that the Stalinists have played the pivotal role in suppressing the mass opposition to the social devastation that has been produced by 15 years of neo-liberal reform.

If the bourgeoisie was able in the early 1990s to so readily effect a fundamental change in its class strategy, extricating itself from the shipwreck of state-led national development and moving to forge a closer alliance with international capital, it was because the Stalinists had for decades made the working class an appendage to one or another capitalist party, on the grounds that the only “realistic” policy was to support the “anti-imperialist” or “anti-feudal wing” of the ruling class, i.e., that most strongly supportive of national development.

Since 1991, the CPM and its Stalinist sister party, the Communist Party of India, have propped up national governments that have pressed forward with neo-liberal reforms, including the current Congress Party-led UPA government, in the name of preventing the BJP from forming the government.

Karat’s frank admission that the CPM-led Left Front is presiding over a neo-liberal West Bengal and the CPM’s use of anti-democratic laws and outright violence to expropriate peasants for capitalist development underscore that this party is a political prop of, and policeman for, the Indian bourgeoisie.



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