

# In wake of West Bengal massacre: Indian workers must advance an independent socialist programme

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Facing popular opposition across India over the police shooting of scores of peasants in Nandigram last week, West Bengal's Left Front government, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), (CPM), is desperately maneuvering to contain the crisis.

On March 17, the Left Front parties announced that the state government will not expropriate land in Nandigram to set up a Special Economic Zone. They further declared that the massive police presence in the area will be scaled down "in phases," and that land acquisition for Special Economic Zones in West Bengal will be temporarily suspended.

Fourteen peasants were killed and at least 75 injured on March 14 when police fired on peasants protesting government plans to seize 10,000 acres in the Nandigram area for a Special Economic Zone to be run by the Indonesian-based Salim Group. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the state chief minister and member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) political bureau, sent 4,000 heavily armed police to reassert government authority in the area. Evidence is now emerging that CPM goons joined in the police attack.

In a manifestation of deep popular anger, people across West Bengal staged a general strike on March 16. Protesters blockaded roads and railways throughout the state. In Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, marchers confronted the police. Schools and colleges were closed and government offices recorded only 20 to 25 percent attendance. Police mobilised by the government arrested some 1,400 people across the state.

Mass anger was such that three Left Front constituent parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Forward Bloc (FB)—expressed support for the strike. They thereby sought to distance themselves from the actions of the CPM chief minister, although he was acting in support of neo-liberal economic policies that have been sanctioned by the Left Front as a whole.

Also backing the strike was an opposition front that is led by the right-wing Trinamul (Grassroots) Congress and includes the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). These bourgeois parties, largely discredited among the working masses, are seeking to exploit mass sentiment against the West Bengal government to promote their right-wing agenda.

The Trinamul Congress and BJP are ardent supporters of economic "reforms" designed to attract international investors at the expense of the living conditions of working people. India's previous national government, a coalition led by the BJP, initiated the programme of Special Economic Zones, which the current Congress-led ruling

coalition is vigorously carrying forward across the country.

The CPM and its allies bear full responsibility for creating conditions in which these right-wing parties can pose as defenders of the toilers against a nominally "left" government that seizes land on behalf of Indian and international capital.

At the national level, the Left Front is sustaining a United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government that is led by the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional governing party. This government is presiding over soaring food prices and mounting unemployment, while lavishing state funds on the military and on infrastructure development projects demanded by the financial elite to facilitate the exploitation of India's natural and human resources.

Unless the working class advances its own independent socialist political programme to solve the problems of the rural poor, reactionary forces—the Congress government and its right-wing BJP and Trinamul Congress rivals—will be given free rein to manipulate the outrage of the toilers at the crimes of the "socialist" Left Front so as to push Indian politics still further to the right.

Already, many press pundits have exulted over the fact that the West Bengal government's complicity in savage repression has gravely undermined the Left Front's political credibility. Commentators have singled out the Left Front's public opposition to the UPA's push for changes in labour laws and other right-wing reforms, predicting that the crisis will make the Left Front even more politically pliant.

In the days immediately following the March 14 massacre, the CPM and its principal Left Front allies, the Communist Party of India, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, held several emergency meetings. Some of the CPM's allies had threatened to quit the West Bengal government in protest over the police action at Nandigram. This was, however, a ruse, designed to put some distance between themselves and the massacre and exploit the Nandigram tragedy to give themselves a greater say in the governing of West Bengal.

At the conclusion of the meetings, the Left Front partners decided to intensify their collaboration in carrying out the government's pro-investor agenda.

Bhattacharjee has refused to offer any apology for the massacre and continues to imply that the peasants' opposition to the government's land acquisition programme has its roots in a combined right-wing-Naxhalite (Maoist) provocation. However, he now admits that he failed to "assess the situation" correctly and promises greater consultation with the other components of the Left Front. As an act of contrition, Bhattacharjee paid a visit to the headquarters of the CPI

rather than insisting the CPI leaders visit him.

The day after the massacre, CPM elder statesman Jyoti Basu publicly criticised Bhattacharjee for “keeping the Left Front cabinet and even the core committee of the cabinet...in the dark.” Citing his “long political experience,” he warned that the CPM cannot run the government alone. “It must be a coalition government,” he insisted.

The Left Front government’s policy of creating Special Economic Zones in West Bengal is part of the Indian ruling elite’s drive to integrate India into the world economy. Basu, as the former chief minister of West Bengal, paved the way for neo-liberal economic reforms in the state, including dispatching government and business delegations to major Western capitals to solicit foreign direct investment.

In the first four decades following Indian independence, the two Stalinist parties—the CPM and CPI—pursued national-reformist policies, pressing for social reforms within the framework of India’s bourgeois republic. While the CPM and CPI differed over the extent to which they were willing to collaborate in parliamentary politics with the Congress Party, they both vehemently upheld the Stalinist-Menshevik theory of two-stage revolution.

They claimed that the legacy of imperialist oppression and feudal backwardness meant that for the foreseeable future the working class could aspire to nothing more than serving as the ally of the purportedly progressive “anti-feudal” and “anti-imperialist” elements of the Indian bourgeoisie in consolidating Indian capitalism.

Thus, in the early and mid-1970s, as the Indian bourgeoisie’s stated national development project was beginning to unravel and India was convulsed by working class and peasant unrest, the CPI was formally allied to Indira Gandhi’s Congress, going so far as to support Gandhi’s declaration of a state of emergency. The CPM, meanwhile, made common cause with the Janata Party—an alliance of bourgeois parties stretching from the Jana Sangh (forerunner of the BJP) on the right to the social democrats.

The West Bengal Left Front government emerged in 1977 as a by-product of the CPM’s subordination of the working class to the Janata Party. In the 1977 West Bengal election, the CPM initially proposed to give its Janata allies a majority of the seats in a Left-Janata electoral alliance. When the alliance disintegrated due to Janata’s insistence on an even larger majority, the Stalinists were stunned to find themselves swept to power on wave of worker-peasant discontent.

In its initial terms in office, the West Bengal Left Front government carried out limited land reforms, which secured it a strong constituency among the rural masses. At the same time, the Left Front faithfully abided by the constitution and political conventions of India’s bourgeois republic.

However, since 1991, the Stalinists have abandoned their traditional national-reformist policies. The CPM and the Left Front, no less than the Indian political establishment as a whole, have participated in the dismantling of India’s nationally regulated economy and the drive to fully integrate India into the world capitalist economy, supporting privatisations, deregulation and cuts in agricultural price supports and public and social services.

Just before last year’s state election, as part of his attempt to prepare a further shift to the right, Battacharjee declared that he would pursue investor-friendly policies even though he claimed to remain personally convinced that humanity would ultimately evolve in the direction of socialism. “I am trying,” he said, “to work on the basis of 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.”

Over the past last few months, the CPM and Battacharjee have intensified their campaign to push for the rapid “industrialisation and development” of West Bengal. They argue that the key to economic prosperity and social, economic and cultural advancement is to convince Indian and international capital to invest in West Bengal.

The events in Nandigram are the bloody result.

In claiming that foreign capitalist investment will produce trickle-down benefits for the masses, the Stalinists are echoing the neo-liberal ideologues.

The globalisation of production within the framework of capitalism has created deepening social inequality in every country of the world. The drive for profits by multinational corporations in the advanced countries has been accompanied by attacks on wages, social welfare programmes and other benefits. In the backward countries, the hundreds of millions living in poverty have become the source of cheap labour for international capital.

The stark reality in India is that these policies have not alleviated the conditions of workers or the rural poor. Thousands of peasants have committed suicide in recent years due to unbearable conditions.

“Industrialisation and development” cannot be achieved for the benefit of the vast majority of society, as the CPM claims, by integrating the country into an exploitative world capitalist system and wooing international capitalists who scour the globe for the cheapest possible labour and the highest possible rates of profit.

At the same time, the vast revolutionary developments in science and technology could be harnessed to eradicate poverty and raise the living standards of the masses throughout the world, including in India—but only on the basis of an international struggle to overthrow the capitalist profit system and establish a planned, socialist economy.

In opposition to the policies of the ruling elite and its appendages, the CPM and the Left Front, the working class must advance its own programme to address the social problems of working people and the landless and poverty-stricken rural poor. This means reorganising the economy for the benefit of vast majority of the people, rather than a privileged elite.

This programme can only be achieved, as part of the struggle for international socialism, by mobilising the working class in alliance with the oppressed peasantry to establish workers’ and peasants’ governments—in the form of the Union of Socialist Republics of the Indian Subcontinent and South Asia.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, advance this perspective. We urge socially conscious workers, youth and intellectuals to consider this perspective and join the struggle to build a section of the ICFI in India.



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