

West Bengal's Left Front government presides over another police massacre

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12 February 2008

The Left Front government in the east Indian state of West Bengal is defending police who opened fire, without warning, on demonstrators Tuesday, February 5, killing five people and injuring many more.

The shooting occurred when a crowd of 10-12,000, participating in an All-India Forward Bloc (AIFB) "law violation" protest in Dinhata—a town located about 730 kilometers north of the state capital Kolkata (Calcutta)—broke through police lines. The crowd had been angered by the refusal of local government officials to accept a memorandum outlining their demands.

The AIFB is the second largest constituent of the Left Front—a multi-party alliance led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—in West Bengal. But over the past year, as West Bengal's CPM-dominated government has ruthlessly pressed forward with a pro-investor industrialization program, the Forward Bloc leadership has found it politic to criticize the state government, especially its suppression of the peasant agitation against the seizure of agricultural land for Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

The police and government are claiming that the 150 police charged with protecting the Dinhata sub-divisional office on February 5 had no choice but to open fire, because the protest had spiraled out of control. Protesters, they claim, had set two police cars ablaze, thrown stones, and roughed up several policemen. The authorities are also claiming that the demonstration had been infiltrated by "antisocial" elements, a charge vigorously denied by local Forward Bloc leaders.

The initial findings of an official police probe show, however, that the police opened fire without warning, although police guidelines stipulate that repeated warnings should be given before any recourse to live ammunition.

That the police callously committed murder in Dinhata is further demonstrated by where people were shot. Police are supposed to fire at demonstrators' legs, but all four who died on the spot had been hit in the neck or head and other protestors received bullets in the torso. Some were shot in the back, yet police guidelines stipulate that police should cease firing as soon as a crowd starts to disperse.

Those killed ranged in age from 25 to 65. All were Forward Bloc activists.

On Friday, the state government announced that two police officers have been transferred from Dinhata, but for their own safety, not because they are being disciplined for the shooting.

"The police in Dinhata," declared Bengal home secretary and CPM leader Prasad Ranjan Ray, "feared an all-out attack from the Bloc demonstrators and hence had to open fire in self-defence... Moreover things went out of control after the protestors set two police vehicles on fire."

Ray's statement is in line with the position taken by the CPM

leadership as a whole.

Maverick CPM Sports and Transport Minister Subhas Chakraboty deplored the shooting, saying, "There was no justification for the police firing at Dinhata on Tuesday. Mob violence could have been contained by some other means."

But the rest of the CPM leadership, beginning with Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member who also heads the police ministry, have defended the actions of the police.

The CPM issued a perfunctory statement following the shootings that failed to express any remorse at the deaths and injuries, let alone take the police to task or pledge a full inquiry into their actions. Rather it called for "peace" and implored that events in Dinhata not become grist for "reactionary forces [that] are trying to disrupt the peaceful atmosphere in West Bengal."

Only under pressure from its Left Front allies did the CPM leadership agree, five days after the police shooting, that the state government should order a judicial probe into the Dinhata deaths.

"I have come to know about the judicial probe from the media," said the Forward Bloc's West Bengal state secretary, Ashok Ghosh. "The Chief Minister didn't call me up after his return from Delhi." (Bhattacharjee was visiting the national capital when the police opened fire in Dinhata.)

Leaders of another Left Front component, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), have expressed concern that the probe will be used to cover up the crimes of the police. Said RSP State Secretary Debabrata Bandopadhyay, "The government should set a deadline for the commission to complete its task. Otherwise, the fate of this probe would be the same as those by earlier commissions that worked for years only to see their reports being dumped."

In response to the February 5 massacre, the AIFB leadership issued a call for a 12-hour, statewide *bandh* or general strike on Wednesday, the 6th. The *bandh*, the first ever initiated by a Left Front component against West Bengal's 31 year-old Left Front government, crippled many government operations and kept most buses and commercial traffic off the roads, but air travel and the IT sector were reportedly unaffected. A spokesman for the CPM-affiliated Confederation of Industrial Trade Unions claimed the strike was "ineffective."

The *bandh* was supported by the state's principal opposition party, the right-wing Trinamul Congress (TMC). Although India's previous Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government, of which the Trinamul Congress was a member, pressed forward with neo-liberal policies, the TMC is posing as an opponent of the West Bengal government's program of expropriating peasant-lands for SEZs. Under the leadership of the anti-communist demagogue Mamata

Bannerjee, the Trinamul Congress is also seeking to exploit the growing divisions within the Left Front, calling on the AIFB to join it in a grand anti-CPM electoral alliance.

The AIFB has spurned these appeals, but it has indicated that it could stand candidates against the CPM in coming local (panchayat) elections in West Bengal and has said it will contest the Tripura state assembly election separately from the CPM.

Others who supported last week's half-day, state-wide general strike included the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI), which split-off from the Stalinist Communist Party of India in 1948. The Congress Party, whose United Progressive Alliance national coalition government is dependent on the parliamentary support of the Left Front to remain in office, offered "moral support."

Despite the killing of its own members and the government's justification of the police's actions, the AIFB leadership has made clear it has no intention of quitting the Left Front government.

Rather it is seeking to use the Dinhata incident, as it has the popular unrest in West Bengal over the government's right-wing policies, to press the CPM to give it and the other major Left Front allies, the RSP and the Communist Party of India, a greater voice in determining the government's policies.

"The question of walking out of the Left government does not arise," declared AIFB state secretary Ashok Ghosh. "We want to remain in power with the people's support and not with guns pointed to their heads."

The AIFB was founded in 1939 by the Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, after he was drummed out of the Congress by Mahatma Gandhi for demanding that it adopt a more aggressive anti-British posture. During World War II, Bose made an alliance with Japanese imperialism, becoming the head of the Japanese-allied Indian National Army. Bose died at the end of war, but the party was continued by his brother, after a brief period during which he returned to the Congress fold.

The West Bengal-based AIFB has been a major Left Front partner since it first came to power in West Bengal in 1977.

Last week's protest in Dinhata was part of a campaign the Forward Bloc initiated in response to growing popular opposition to the West Bengal government's pursuit of pro-investor policies aimed at making the state a cheap-labor haven. This opposition has taken multiple forms, including a peasant revolt against land expropriation in Nandigram and riots over corruption in the food ration system.

Last week's killings came eleven months after the massacre of 14 villagers on March 14, 2007 in Nandigram. That carnage occurred when the West-Bengal Stalinist Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee deployed 4,000 heavily-armed police to reassert government control over Nandigram, whose population had resisted a government plan to confiscate their agricultural land, their sole source of livelihood, so as to establish an SEZ to be controlled by the Indonesian conglomerate, the Salim Group. (See West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre) The police were driven off, but in November, CPM-goons staged a second assault, which left at least eight villagers dead, scores of others injured, and 10,000 or more homeless.

The Stalinists' savage repression of the Nandigram uprising has caused a hemorrhaging of its popular support, including among a section of the West Bengal intelligentsia long identified with the party.

The Forward Bloc's "law violation" or civil disobedience campaign

is ostensibly aimed at forcing the government to call a halt to the establishment of further Special Economic Zones, but the CPM, which by itself commands a majority of seats in the West Bengal assembly, has repeatedly proclaimed SEZs the core of its government program.

Other AIFB demands include forbidding the entry of giant transnational retail corporations such as Wal-Mart into the state's retail trade and providing reservations—affirmative action programs—for the state's largely impoverished Muslim minority.

The most powerful sections of Indian capital have repeatedly expressed their confidence in Bhattacharjee and the CPM leadership. Tata, for example, has chosen to build its new ultra-low cost car at an SEZ in Singur, near Kolkata. But the growing popular unrest and the repeated and increasingly frequent instances of government-instigated violence are causing anxiety and apprehension.

"Pulling the trigger gets more and more reckless as the government suffers a jerk in the knee even in the face of a perfectly democratic agitation," declared *The Statesman*, a Kolkata daily. "Palpable indeed is the urge to seek fatally quick-fix solutions and an increasing tendency to seek desperate options. This is illustrated by the summoning of the army first to restore order over a four-km radius in Kolkata [a reference to the use of the army in November to suppress a riot of Muslim fundamentalists] and more recently to douse a fire, essentially the outcome of municipal negligence. And when the army is not an agreeable or viable option, the police are ordered to fire and kill, an action carried out with a degree of malevolence that is as calculated as it is political. Tuesday's firing violated every rule in the book... Which makes it plain that the firing, as in Nandigram last March, was ordered to kill."

The *Telegraph*, the other major English-language Kolkata daily, for its part, expressed concern that the police violence could fuel further unrest and adversely impact on the CPM's drive to make West Bengal a profit haven for domestic and international capital. It declared, "As the events at Singur and Nandigram last year showed, Mr. Bhattacharjee faces tough political challenges to his economic agenda. The last thing he needs is violent, obstructionist politics by partners of the Front. Wednesday's *bandh* cannot do his—or Bengal's—image any good. But the chief minister has other reasons to worry about the events at Dinhata. The police firing suggests that the men in uniform are increasingly incapable of tackling a mob without killing people. Memories of the police firing at Nandigram are still fresh in the people's minds. The government cannot afford to give them the impression that the police in Bengal are not accountable for their actions. Despite the violence at Nandigram and Singur, Bengal's successes in attracting investments last year were second only to Gujarat's. But continued violence and administrative bunglings can spoil the promise."



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