

India: Stalinist CPM's triennial meeting to reiterate support for Congress Party-led government

Nanda Wickremasinghe, K. Ratnayake
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The Communist Party of India (Marxist), India's most important Stalinist party and the dominant partner in the Left Front, is holding its 19th congress in Coimbatore, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, from March 29 to April 3.

Since May 2004, the Left Front has supported "from the outside" a Congress Party-led coalition government that has pursued a socially incendiary program of neo-liberal reforms that have produced acute distress in rural India and growing poverty and economic insecurity in India's urban centers.

Without the votes of the MPs from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its Left Front partners, the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government would fall.

In the three states where the Left Front forms the government—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura—it is implementing pro-investor policies akin to those of the UPA in the name of economic growth and industrialization.

In the run-up to the CPM's triennial congress, the party leadership has attempted to put some rhetorical distance between itself and the UPA government. CPM General-Secretary Prakash Karat has said that henceforth his party will place greater emphasis on the development of a "third alternative" to the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's other major party. Karat has also announced that the CPM will demand the UPA government scrap the Indo-US Defence Framework Agreement signed in June 2005.

But the CPM leadership, as attested both by its statements in public and the political resolution to be adopted at the 19th congress, has also reiterated its continued support for the UPA government and for the "business friendly" policies being pursued by the three Left Front state governments.

The UPA government, said Karat in an interview published in the March 14 issue of the magazine *Outlook*, "is stable because we're supporting it. It will last its full term. If it falls, it won't be because of us."

Yet the CPM leadership concedes in its congress resolution that the "UPA government's overall direction has been to push through policies, which are to the benefit of big business and foreign capital."

The CPM leadership points to its influence in the corridors of power in New Delhi and to the Left's election victories in Kerala and West Bengal in May 2006 and in tiny Tripura this February to claim that the party is going from strength to strength.

In reality, the Stalinists are holding their congress under conditions of mounting crisis. This crisis is rooted in the ever-more glaring incongruity between the CPM's claims to speak for India's toilers and to champion Marxism and its pivotal role in assisting the bourgeoisie in implementing its neo-liberal agenda and pursuing its ambition of making India a cheap-labor haven for world capitalism.

Last year's events in Nandigram, West Bengal—which saw the CPM organize the bloody suppression of a peasant rebellion against the state expropriation of land for a Special Economic Zone to be run by the Salim Group, an Indonesian-based multinational—provoked indignation, anger, and revulsion among workers, farmers and intellectuals across India. Prominent left-wing writers and academics, many of them long associated with the CPM, condemned the atrocity.

Sumit Sarkar, arguably the foremost historian of modern India, the novelist Arundhati Roy, and other prominent left-wing intellectuals issued an open letter condemning the CPM which read in part, "To 'share similar values' with the [CPM] today is to stand for unbridled capitalist development, nuclear energy at the cost of both ecological concerns and mass displacement of people ...

"Over the last decade, the policies of the Left Front government in West Bengal have become virtually indistinguishable from those of other parties committed to the neoliberal agenda. Indeed, 'the important experiments undertaken in the State'—the land reforms [the Left Front government enacted in the late 1970s and early 1980s] ...—are being rapidly reversed. According to figures provided by the West Bengal state secretary for land reforms, over the past five years there has been a massive increase of landless peasants in the state due to government acquisition of land cheaply for handing over to corporations and developing posh upper class neighbourhoods."

Even the CPM's partners in West Bengal's Left Front government—the Forward Block, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and the CPM's Stalinist sister party, the Communist Party of India (CPI)—found it politic to disassociate themselves from the CPM's actions in Nandigram.

The CPM's congress resolution dismisses the Nandigram events with a few brief lines near the end, which insinuate that they were an anti-CPM provocation. According to the resolution, right-wing and ultra-left (Naxalite) forces enlisted the peasants of Nandigram in a "campaign against the CPM," because of "the prominent role" the party has "played ... in national politics in opposing a strategic alliance with US imperialism and waging a determined struggle to check the UPA government's neo-liberal inclinations..."

No amount of Stalinist lies can wipe away the fact that the CPM orchestrated two peasant massacres in Nandigram and that it did so directly on behalf of Indian and foreign capital, which has pressed the West Bengal Left Front government to create Special Economic Zones, where normal taxes and labor standards do not apply. Acting on the orders of West Bengal's CPM-led Left Front government more than 4,000 thousand heavily-armed state security forces stormed Nandigram on March 14, 2007 and opened fire on peasants who sought to block their way, killing 14. Then in early November 2007, the CPM unleashed its own goon squads on Nandigram, in an operation that restored government

authority in the area, by killing another eight people, razing houses to the ground, and forcing upwards of 18,000 Nandigram residents to flee the area.

Certainly the right-wing Trinamul Congress and other enemies of the working class have sought to exploit the Nandigram events so as to push Indian politics to the right, but it is the Stalinists who made this possible by acting as bloody enforcers for big business.

Moreover, the Stalinists themselves cravenly capitulated to the right's campaign. While the CPM dismissed the protests of workers and socialist-minded intellectuals over Nandigram, it felt politically vulnerable following last November's goon attack, and so the CPM prevailed on the Left Front to cede to the UPA government's demand that it be allowed to initiate negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The IAEA negotiations are a key step toward implementing the Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation treaty.

Two further points need be made. The Left Front was reelected in West Bengal in May 2006 with the explicit support of big business, which had become convinced that the Stalinists were the best vehicle for implementing neo-liberal reform in the state. And both Indian and foreign capital have welcomed the ruthlessness with which the CPM has met opposition to its industrialization program at Nandigram and before that at Singur, site of a new Tata car plant. Last April, only weeks after he had ordered the state police to storm Nandigram, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee received approval from Washington for his longstanding request for an official invitation to visit the US, so as to meet with government officials and potential investors.

Second and even more importantly, far from leading the struggle against the Congress and the Indian bourgeoisie's neo-liberal agenda, the CPM and the Left Front have played an indispensable role in its implementation. In addition to implementing capitalist restructuring in those states where the CPM-led Left Front holds office, the Stalinists have helped sustain a succession of right-wing Union governments in power, and worked might and main to confine the mass opposition of the toilers to impotent protests aimed at pressuring the bourgeoisie to slow the pace of neo-liberal reform.

The CPM-led Left Front helped sustain in office the minority Congress Party government that in 1991 initiated a sea-change in the Indian bourgeoisie's class strategy by abandoning national economic regulation and state-led development in favor of full integration into the world capitalist economy. Although the Stalinists didn't formally join the subsequent "United Front government" of 1996-98, which pressed forward with neo-liberal reform, they played a major role in both the formulation of government policy and keeping the ramshackle coalition of regional and caste-based bourgeois parties together.

The current Congress-led government has been utterly dependent on the Stalinists—to provide its parliamentary majority, but just as importantly to defuse social anger.

The Stalinists and the trade unions have mounted a series of one-day general strikes, but these have been directed not at mobilizing the working class as an independent political force advancing its own program to meet the social crisis. Rather their aim has been to ensure the continued political subordination of the working class to the Congress-led UPA.

And the Stalinists have been at pains to ensure that these protests do not cut across their own efforts to court capital. After a one-day nationwide strike in West Bengal disrupted the state's IT sector, despite the Left Front government having passed legislation all but outlawing work stoppages at IT companies, Left Front Chief Minister Battacharjee declared, "This menace [of strikes] is known to me. I can assure you that the strongest action will be taken against such perpetrators in the future."

Invariably the central message of the CPM's agitations are that the working class must pressure the UPA to implement the Common

Minimum Programme, which is ostensibly both the government's agenda and the basis for the Left Front's support for the government.

The Common Minimum Program, which was largely authored by the Stalinists themselves, is a political fraud. It combines promises of increased social spending, many of them vague, with pledges to carry forward economic restructuring. It is based on the lie that it is possible to reconcile the bourgeoisie's program to use India's vast reserves of cheap to make it a center of production for the world capitalist market with the needs of the masses.

The CPM congress resolution is full of half-truths and outright lies as the Stalinists seek to justify their support for the UPA government and the Left Front state governments' pro-investor policies, while maintaining the pretense theirs is a party of the working class and toilers and force for socialism.

Thus the resolution criticizes the UPA government for "recklessly promot[ing] an unbridled proliferation of SEZs," while omitting to mention that the CPM voted for the government's SEZ legislation in May 2005 in both houses of parliament

At a press conference last January 4, Jyoti Basu, the CPM's elder statesman and former West Bengal chief minister, spelled out unabashedly the party's subservience to and support for capitalism. Said Basu, "Socialism is not achievable at this point of time. We have been working within the capitalist system and as such private capital has to be used while social welfare programmes by the state government would continue." He then added: "Socialism is a far cry. Socialism is our political agenda and it was mentioned in our party document but capitalism will continue to be the compulsion for the future."

No less blunt was Basu's successor, Battacharjee, in justifying the West Bengal government's efforts to woo capital in competition with the political representatives of other regional bourgeois cliques. "Our stand is clear," Battacharjee told *Frontline* last in February 2007. "For the development of the state, we need capital. ... To me capital has no color ... We could not say no to such a project, otherwise it would have gone to Uttarakhand (state)."

The Congress Party and the most far-sighted sections of the bourgeoisie recognize the critical role that the CPM and the Left Front play in containing popular discontent. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has repeatedly explained the need to obtain the Left's support when carrying through contentious changes. Nevertheless, important sections of the bourgeoisie are growing increasingly frustrated with the accommodations the government has had to make to ensure the Left Front's support. In particular, they want the government to gut restrictions on the contracting out of work, layoffs and plant closures and to move forward with the implementation of the Indo-US nuclear treaty in defiance of the CPM and the Left Front.

In the nearly eight months since Prime Manmohan Singh first publicly raised the possibility that he might dare the Left Front to bring his government down over the nuclear treaty, CPM leaders have repeatedly said that they will not precipitate the UPA government's demise and intend to sustain it in office until the government reaches the end of its mandate in early 2009. At the same time, they have said that they cannot allow the treaty to be enacted, because it is aimed at harnessing India to the US's predatory foreign policy.

In other words, the Stalinists have made it clear that they will leave the initiative with the Congress and the bourgeoisie, allowing it to decide if and when it will break the current alliance with the Left.

At the same time, because of the growing popular disaffection with the government and so as to position themselves for elections—the electoral base of the CPM is in states where the BJP is a negligible factor and the Congress a major rival—the CPM has revived discussion of an third alternative. By this it means an electoral bloc with various regional and caste-based bourgeois parties, parties which have implemented the

bourgeoisie's neo-liberal agenda when in office and many of which, like the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam Party, have previously allied with the BJP.

The Stalinists justify their propping up of the Congress-led UPA on the grounds that it is amenable to pressure and that this is the only means of blocking the return to power of the Hindu supremacist BJP. This is a traditional Stalinist canard—that the only way to counter reaction is by aligning with the reputedly more progressive sections of the bourgeoisie.

The growing power of the extreme right is itself a sign of the crisis of bourgeois rule and malignancy of capitalism.

Indeed, it is the Stalinists who by subordinating the working class to the Indian bourgeoisie for decades, paved the way for the transformation of the Hindu right from a marginal force into India's second largest party. In the early and mid-1970s, when India, like the rest of the world, was convulsed by economic crisis and social struggles, the CPM's sister party, the CPI entered into a coalition with the Congress, going so far as to defend Indira Gandhi's Emergency. The CPM, meanwhile, subordinated the working class to the bourgeois opposition to Gandhi, supporting the Janata Party, an ad hoc party formed to fight the 1977 election and one of whose principal components was the BJP's forerunner, the Jana Sangh.

It was the Stalinists' betrayal of the working class and peasant upsurge of the late 1960s and 1970s, that subsequently enabled the Hindu right and all manner of regionalist and casteist parties to benefit from the increasing popular disaffection with the Congress in the last two decades of the twentieth century—first as a result of the manifest failure of the post-independence national project to address any of the fundamental problems of the masses, and then as the neo-liberal reforms initiated by Congress in 1991 led to increased poverty and economic insecurity.

In defending its support for the UPA government, the CPM congress resolution says that “it would be a mistake to underestimate their [Hindu supremacists] latent strength.” Later it adds, “given the growing discontent and the economic difficulties of the people, the potential exists for the discontent to be canalized into divisive communal politics.”

But in so far as this is true it is because the working class, thanks to the CPM and the Left Front, has been tied to the Congress—the bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, and the initiator of the program of deregulation, privatization, and marketization. The Stalinist claims of the Congress Party's commitment to secularism notwithstanding, this party has also repeatedly connived with the Hindu right and abetted communalism, since at least as far back as the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent. In last December's Gujarat elections, the Congress formed an electoral alliance with a group of BJP dissidents whose leaders had been directly implicated in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat.

The CPM is opposing the Indo-US nuclear treaty, correctly warning that Washington views it as a means of pulling India into its military-geopolitical orbit, and the congress resolution is chock full of denunciations of the crimes of US imperialism including the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Washington's steadfast support for the dispossession of the Palestinian people.

But the Stalinists' anti-US rhetoric has nothing to do with a genuine anti-imperialist policy, based on the independent political mobilization of the international working class against all the rival bourgeois cliques and their nation states.

The CPM lauds the traditional “non-aligned policy” of the Indian bourgeoisie and opposes to US imperialism the call for a multi-polar world, and for an alliance between India, Russia and China. The latter it hails as a socialist country although the Beijing regime presides over the ruthless exploitation of the Chinese working class by indigenous capital and by US, European and Japanese multinationals. “There are major trends,” enthuses the CPM resolution, “which are promoting multipolarity and countering the unilateralism of the US and its hegemonic methods. Russia has been asserting its independent role and sovereign

rights.”

While the CPM criticizes the UPA government's military build-up, it fully support the Indian bourgeoisie's goal of obtaining a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, claims that the Indian state can play a progressive role on the world stage, and in Nepal played a pivotal role in helping the Indian government broker an agreement aimed at ending the Maoist insurgency there and restabilizing bourgeois rule.

For decades the CPM and the CPI, from which it split-off in the 1964, justified their subordination of the working class to the Congress or one or another bourgeois political formation on the basis of the Stalinist-Menshevik two-stage theory of revolution. They argued that it was necessary to support the reputedly progressive wing of the national bourgeoisie in opposing imperialism, first in obtaining independence from Britain and then in developing a national economy and eliminating landlordism, caste oppression and other legacies of colonialism and feudal backwardness. Only when the democratic revolution was completed in alliance with the bourgeoisie, could there be, insisted the Stalinists, any struggle for socialism,

Today under conditions where the Indian bourgeoisie has abandoned any pretense of opposing imperialism, supports India's full integration in the world capitalist economy and is angling for a strategic partnership with US imperialism, the Stalinists are even more emphatic that the working class must not challenge the political domination of the bourgeoisie. The Congress must be supported against the BJP and the working class and peasantry must accept the profit-driven compulsions of capitalism and the gifting of their lands to foreign investors, because capitalist industrialization will provide the “material basis for socialism.”

The CPM is an integral part of the Indian political establishment, having administered the country's third largest state for the past 30 years, and a vital prop of the Indian bourgeois. A new revolutionary party of the Indian working class must be built based on the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution. In opposition to the bourgeoisie and all its parties, the Indian working class must advance a program of democratic and socialist demands aimed at mobilizing India's toiling masses in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government and at fusing the struggle of India's toilers with the international working class' struggle against imperialism and global capital and for socialism.



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