

India's Stalinists mount innocuous protests as masses confront spiraling food prices

A WSWS Reporting Team
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The Communist Party of India (Marxist), the country's principal Stalinist party and the dominant party in the Left Front parliamentary bloc, mounted demonstrations outside central government offices in cities and towns across India on Thursday to protest spiraling food prices.

The CPM had said one million people would participate in yesterday's day of protest. But indications are that the turnout was smaller than promised, and probably much smaller.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team in Chennai (Madras), India's fourth largest city, found no more than 350 people had joined a CPM picket outside the government-owned BSNL telephone exchange in Purasaivakkam, a working-class district in the north of the city. The picket of the BSNL installation was one of nine protests the CPM organized in Chennai, whose population is almost 8 million.

The CPM, its Left Front allies, and the trade unions organized one-day general strikes on August 8, 2007, Dec. 14, 2006, and September 29, 2005, with the stated aim of pressing the Congress Party-led, minority United Progressive Alliance government to abandon its neo-liberal economic policies.

Yesterday's protests shared the same bankrupt perspective of appealing to the big business UPA to enact "pro-people policies, but unlike the one-day general strikes, which mobilized tens of millions of unionized and unorganized workers and paralyzed much of the country, yesterday's protests were innocuous affairs, largely restricted to members and close supporters of the CPM. In Chennai, for example, there was no serious effort to rally popular support. Few if any posters were put up or leaflets distributed in advance.

The CPM has repeatedly stated that the Left Front will sustain the UPA in office until next spring, when it will reach the end of its five year-term, even though the Stalinists concede that the UPA has pressed forward with pro-big business policies and the Congress leadership has repeatedly signaled that it is plotting to break with the Left Front so as to implement a civilian nuclear treaty the US. The treaty is meant to cement a "global," Indo-US strategic partnership.

At the CPM's protest in the national capital, New Delhi, CPM Politburo member and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) General-Secretary M.K. Pandhe leveled a rhetorical tirade against the UPA government—no matter that it is being sustained in office by the Left Front.

Speaking before a crowd estimated by the Press Trust of India to have numbered only in the "scores," Pandhe denounced the government for not taking "effective steps" to curb inflation. "The Government," said Pandhe, "appears to be more interested in safeguarding the interests of hoarders and private companies rather than those of the suffering people."

The CPM did not even organize protests yesterday in Left Front-ruled West Bengal and in Karnataka, on the grounds that *panchayat* (local) elections are being held in the former and that the latter is in the midst of a state election campaign.

The CPM, like the rest of India's political establishment, fears that spiraling food prices will fuel widespread social unrest. Already last fall, there were food riots in parts of Left Front-governed West Bengal, triggered by popular complaints that the Public Distribution System (PDS)—a federal government-funded but state government-run program to ensure food for those with low-incomes—is riddled with corruption.

As around the world, food prices have shot up dramatically in India in recent months. According to the government, in the week ending April 26 the annual wholesale price inflation rate reached 7.61 percent. The increase in retail prices, especially food prices, is much higher. The Consumer Affairs Ministry has conceded that in India's four biggest urban areas—Mumbai (Bombay), Delhi, Kolkata, and Chennai—retail prices of fourteen essential food items, including rice, wheat, sugar and edible oil, rose 40 percent between March 2007 and March 2008.

Such increases invariably impact most heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population. 800 million of India's 1.1 billion people live on less than \$US 2 a day and an estimated 300 million live on just one dollar a day. UNICEF India office chief of child nutrition, Victor Aguayo said Wednesday, "Increase of food prices is adding another layer of vulnerability. ... [I]f food prices continue to increase it will lead to people skipping meals and staying hungry."

And this under conditions where there is already acute distress in much of rural India, with thousands of indebted small farmers taking their lives every year. A recent report published in *The Lancet*, the British-based internationally-renowned medical journal, found that over 51 percent of children in India under five are stunted as a result of child and maternal malnutrition.

Last week Indian Finance Minister, P. Chidambaram attended an Asian Development Bank sponsored-meeting of Asian finance ministers in Madrid to discuss the food crisis and developing social unrest. On his return, he warned that there would be no quick let up in price increases. Said Chidambaram, "Inflation is not coming down globally because there has been continuous rise in oil prices, which touched \$124 per barrel, and also because of continuous rise in food prices."

India's finance minister warned a World Bank meeting in April, "Unless we act fast for a global consensus on the price spiral, the social unrest induced by food prices in several countries will

conflagrate into a global contagion, leaving no country, developed or otherwise, unscathed.”

In recent weeks the Indian government has taken some timid steps to contain inflation, including raising banks’ required cash reserve ratio, but it fears that a break with the investor-friendly easy-credit policy of recent years will choke off economic growth. Already there are signs that the economy is slowing, including a sharp slowing of growth in the manufacturing sector.

The government has banned the export of rice (except the most expensive variety), pulses, cement, and steel and it has scrapped import duties on maize and edible oil. While these measures point to the government’s nervousness, Chidambaram and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh have ruled out any widespread return to economic regulation, arguing that that would gravely undermine its and previous governments’ attempts to transform India into a cheap-labor haven for world capitalism.

The CPM is demanding more aggressive measures, including a ban on futures trading in 25 agricultural commodities (as proposed by a Parliamentary Standing Committee), universalizing the Public Distribution System (PDS), cuts in customs and excise duties on oil, reduction in retail prices of petrol and diesel, and stringent action against the hoardings of essential commodities.

There is little if any prospect that the big business UPA government will adopt these measures, which if they were to truly alleviate the condition of the poor, would have to be paid for through dramatically increased taxation on big business and the rich.

But even if the government did they would be at best stop-gap measures, under conditions of growing worldwide economic crisis.

The Stalinists, meanwhile, are opposed to any challenge to the essential class strategy of the Indian bourgeoisie, which in 1991 abandoned state-led capitalist development in favor of export-led growth and full-scale integration of India into the world capitalist economy. Indeed, the CPM-led Left Front government in West Bengal has been ruthlessly expropriating land for special economic zones for Indian and international investors. (See West Bengal: Left Front government rattled by popular outrage over Nandigram massacre)

Yesterday’s CPM protests, like the more boisterous one-day general strikes, were aimed at tying an increasingly economically hard-pressed and angry populace to the Stalinists’ policy of sustaining the Congress, the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie in office, on the grounds that it is the only means of presenting the return to power of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP.

At the same time, the Stalinists have been cynically exploiting the food price issue to develop closer relations with various regionalist and casteist parties in anticipation of next year’s election. In April, the Left Front made common cause with the United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA)—an alliance comprised of the Samajwadi Party, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)—in a weeklong series of token protests against the food price rises.

All of the constituent parties of the UNPA are bourgeois parties that have participated, like the CPM, itself in implementing the bourgeoisie’s neo-liberal agenda.

The TDP, which the Stalinists are now hailing as a “secular” party, was one of most important constituents of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, which governed India from 1998 to 2004. The TDP, which formed the state government in Andhra Pradesh, suffered a crushing defeat in the 2004 Andhra Pradesh state elections, as the population repudiated its World Bank-

endorsed “reform” policies.

Speaking at a joint rally with the UNPA on April 19, CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat warned the UPA government: “An explosive situation will emerge if [food] prices are not controlled.”

A party of the Indian establishment, its ritual invocations of Marxism notwithstanding, the CPM is determined to prevent the working class from advancing a socialist program aimed at channeling the growing anger of the population over increasing economic insecurity and social inequality into a challenge to an outmoded socio-economic order which places the profits of the few before the social needs of the masses.

The four members of the WWSW reporting team who attended the CPM picket in Purasavakkam, Chennai, were physically threatened by CPM cadres, after they distributed copies of articles from the website. One of the CPM cadres said, “These people have been attacking us on Nandigram” (a reference to the WWSW’s condemnation of the violent repression the West Bengal Left front government has employed to crush peasant resistance at Nandigram to its policy of expropriating land from poor peasants for big business). Another CPM cadre, pointing to the phrase “Stalinist parties” in one of the articles, alleged that the WWSW is trying to “confuse” the masses about the CPM.

The WWSW team spoke to several of those who were watching the CPM picket. Mohan, a fifty year-old auto rickshaw driver told the WWSW: “Instead of protesting and shouting slogans like ‘Central government! And the State government!’ Why cannot they—the CPM and the CPI [Communist Party of India]—withdraw their support to the central government in Delhi and the [DMK] state government in Chennai? They are holding the feet of the central government in Delhi, while here in front of us they are protesting against it.”

Railway engineer Aputhanathan also observed that the CPM is propping up big business governments. “They (the CPM) are cheating the people,” he said. “They are not only supporting central government but the state government here as well. They supported P. Chidambaram, the UPA government’s finance minister, to get elected from the Sivaganga parliamentary constituency. But this finance minister is at the very center of UPA government’s economic policies favoring big business in opposition to the basic needs of ordinary people. This is all eyewash!”



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