

# Protests in West Bengal threaten to derail CPI (M)-sponsored Nano car project

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5 September 2008

A 13-day-long peasant agitation for the return of land seized by the West Bengal Left Front government on behalf of the Tata Group is threatening to derail the Indian transnational company's high-profile Nano Car project in Singur, which lies some 50 kilometers from the state capital Kolkata (Calcutta).

Tata and its automobile division, Tata Motors, have promoted the Nano—a two-cylinder, four-seater slated to go on sale later this year for around \$2,500 US—as proof of their technical prowess. Tata's "people's car" project has also been hailed by India's ruling elite as evidence of India's rise to world-power status.

The agitation has seen peasants and their supporters camping outside and ultimately blocking access to a huge tract of land in Singur, where Tata has all but finished building its Nano assembly plant and auto parts-makers have established ancillary facilities. The protest movement is being organized under the auspices of an ad hoc umbrella group made up of 21 organizations including political parties, NGOs and peasant groups.

Political leadership of the movement is, nevertheless, effectively in the hands of Trinamul [Grassroots Party] Congress leader Mamata Banerjee. The official opposition in the state legislature, the Trinamul Congress is a right-wing, Bengal regionalist party which began as a split-off from the Congress Party. It has frequently made common cause with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and participated in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, which during its tenure in office (1998-2004) aggressively pursued big business's agenda of deregulation, tax cuts, privatization and marketization.

If an anticommunist demagogue like Banerjee is now able to posture as the voice of West Bengal's downtrodden peasants it is because the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front is ruthlessly pursuing "pro-investor" policies aimed at making the state a haven for cheap-labor manufacturing and business-processing. In the name of promoting the "industrialization" of West Bengal, the Stalinists have invoked colonial era legislation to expropriate peasant land on behalf of big business, then employed anti-democratic laws and lethal violence to quell popular opposition.

The immediate demand of the Singur protesters is for the return of 400 of the 1,000 acres of land expropriated by West Bengal's Stalinist-led government in 2006. The government has claimed that the peasants "voluntarily" sold their land, their sole means of livelihood. In fact they were cajoled, bullied and coerced, with both legal and extra-legal methods employed.

On Tuesday, the Tata Group announced immediate suspension of all construction work at the Singur plant site. "Tata Motors," declared a company press release, "has been constrained to suspend construction and commissioning work at the Nano plant in Singur in view of the continued confrontation and agitation at the site.' "

The company also threatened to transfer the Nano project out of West Bengal if the protests persist: "In view of the current situation, the company is evaluating alternative options for manufacturing the Nano car at other company facilities and a detailed plan to relocate the plant and machinery to an alternative site is under preparation."

The statement went on to claim that the decision to suspend work on the Singur plant "was taken in order to ensure the safety of its employees and contract labour, who have continued to be violently obstructed from reporting to work."

In fact, the company has shown callous disregard for both the peasants whose land it has grabbed with the Stalinists' help and for the workers, many of whom come from the dispossessed peasant families. As a result of the suspension of work on the plant, Tata has placed the workers on indefinite layoff without pay.

In its statement, Tata offered the laid-off workers only a non-binding promise that it will inquire as to whether it can employ them elsewhere at some future date: "To minimize the impact [that the indefinite suspension of work] may have on the recently-recruited and trained people from West Bengal, the company is exploring the possibility of absorbing them at its other plant locations,"

It was reported that on Wednesday a 65-year-old day laborer at the Tata site, distraught at his inability to provide for his family, committed suicide.

Tata's threat to relocate the Nano project is a sign of its determination to force a quick end to the Singur agitation.

Since Tata has already spent rupees 15 billion (\$350 million) on developing the West Bengal site and moving the project would entail major delays in the car's launch, the company will be loathe to carry through on its threat. But other state governments have been quick to express interest in offering Tata an alternate site.

In a September 3 article, the *Times of India* quoted a company source as saying, "This may well be a posturing by the company to show its seriousness on the threat. However, if there is no positive response, the company will pull out."

The Tata threat is aimed at both the West Bengal Left Front

government and the Trinamul Congress.

The Stalinists twice resorted to lethal mass violence last year in seeking to quell a peasant protest against its plans to expropriate 10,000 acres of land in Nandigram to set up a Special Economic Zone for the Salim Group. In the first instance, the CPM deployed 4,000 heavily armed state police. In the second they used CPM goons. (See “West Bengal’s Stalinist government mounts terror campaign to quash peasant unrest” and “West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre”)

But the bloody events at Nandigram provoked revulsion across India and have dealt a body blow to the Stalinists’ pretensions to represent India’s toilers. Fearing public approbation, the Left Front allies of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] have repeatedly made after-the-fact criticisms of the government’s Special Economic Zone policy and the methods the government has employed in implementing it.

For fear of the political fallout, the Left Front government has thus far refrained from mounting a major police action against the Singur agitation.

At the same time, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharya has been at pains to underscore his government’s determination to act as the guarantors of big business interests and profits. In an address to the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) on August 26 he declared, “I am against bandhs [general strikes]. Unfortunately I belong to a political party which calls bandhs. I have kept quiet. But from now on, I’ll not keep quiet.”

Bhattacharya went on to condemn gherao, a protest tactic that became popular during the worker-student-peasant radicalization of the 1960s and which involves the encircling of a person in authority. “Gherao,” affirmed Bhattacharya, “is illegal and immoral. It is our contribution to the English language. It will not be allowed in the state.”

It has been reported that the Left Front government is considering legislation to curtail workers’ rights to resort to job action and imposing on workers a new legal responsibility to meet management production goals.

The Tata threat is also aimed at persuading Banerjee and her Trinamul Congress that there will be a political cost if they continue to align themselves, albeit for the purposes of weakening the Left Front government, with the peasant movement against land expropriations.

The corporate media has taken up the Tatas’ cause, vilifying the protesters in unison and imploring Banerjee to seek a speedy accommodation with her Left Front rivals. Other corporate leaders have also spoken out in support of the Tata Group. Bharti Group Chairman and CEO Sunil Bharti Mittal said, “The Tatas pulling out of West Bengal would be unfortunate for India. Nano is seen as a world car and has drawn international acclaim. Immediate political dialogue to find a solution towards keeping the project in West Bengal is imperative.”

On occasion Banerjee has cast herself as a champion of the poor against the Tatas (one of India’s oldest and most prestigious bourgeois families.) But this is pure bombast. She has repeatedly voiced support for increased big business investment in West

Bengal.

A couple of days ago she made the following comment to the press: “We want work to resume at the Tata Motors plant soon because we don’t want the poor workers to suffer. We are not against the Tatas. We want the Tatas to bring out their car. Let there be talks to resolve the impasse. But our demand is fixed. The government has to return 400 acres of farmland to the unwilling farmers.”

In assuming a leading role in the current agitations, Mamata wishes to politically capitalize on the widespread popular opposition to the Stalinists’ pro-investor policies and bloody repression, while directing peasant grievances into safe and harmless channels.

There are indications, however, that the agitation has gone somewhat beyond her control. It was never Banerjee’s intention to stop work on the Tata plant, but on the evening of August 27 protesters initiated more militant action when they blocked busloads of employees from leaving the factory gates for several hours.

Banerjee has now announced that she will take part in a meeting between representatives of her party and Chief Minister Bhattacharya, which is to be hosted by the West Bengal governor. Representatives of none of the other organizations involved in the agitation appear to have been invited to the talks.

It is quite likely that the talks are aimed at isolating the more militant elements by striking a deal with the Trinamul Congress offering increased compensation to farmers for the loss of their land. Whether such a strategy will succeed is yet to be seen.

The Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has demonstrably announced that it will not intervene in the Singur dispute.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the most important UPA minister from West Bengal, Pranab Mukherjee, have frequently lavished praise on the Left Front government and its “industrialization” policy. But the Congress has assumed a much more aggressive stance against the Stalinists since the Left Front withdrew its support for the government in July over the Indo-US nuclear treaty.



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