

West Bengal: Standoff continues over Stalinists' land seizure for Tata Motors

Maoists promote Bannerjee

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The political situation in West Bengal remains highly charged, with the Left Front state government desperately seeking to put an end to peasant agitation against the seizure of prime agricultural land for a Tata Motors car assembly complex.

In late 2006, West Bengal's Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government forced more than 12,000 peasants and their families from 1,000 acres of land in Singur, 40 kilometers from the West Bengal capital, Kolkata. To do so, the Stalinists invoked a colonial land expropriation law and Section 144 of India's criminal code, which enables the state to suspend basic civil liberties and forcibly suppress opposition.

Led by the right-wing Trinamul Congress (TMC), the Singur agitation is demanding that the 2,000 farmers who never signed up for the government's paltry financial compensation package be provided land in Singur and that jobs be given to agricultural workers and others who lost their livelihood as a result of the land expropriation.

The agitation, which began on August 25, has been "suspended" since September 7. But Tata, one of India's largest conglomerates, has not resumed work at the Singur site. Nor has it rescinded its threats to withdraw the prestige Nano car project from West Bengal and abandon the 1,000 acre site the government created for it at Singur, if iron-clad guarantees are not given forthwith that there will be no further protests.

Last week, Tata Motors managing director G. Ravi Kant met with the Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa, to discuss the south Indian state's offer to give the company a like-sized land allotment if it transferred assembly of the Nano—a \$2,500 "people's car"—to Karnataka. "There will not be any protest or agitation against the project [in Karnataka]," vowed Yeddyurappa, whose Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has abetted "popular" Hindu supremacist violence in the state, but unquestionably would use the full coercive powers of the state to suppress peasant opposition to big business.

On Sunday the *Hindustan Times* reported that it had been told in confidence by West Bengal government officials that during the previous week Tata had removed key materials from its newly-built Singur plant, including dyes.

A "gentleman's agreement" to compensate the "holdout" farmers whose land was stripped for them by government fiat and agricultural laborers who depended on the land for their livelihood was reputedly reached September 7. But the "understanding" between the West Bengal government and the Trinamul Congress-led Singur peasant movement quickly unraveled.

Eschewing further talks with Trinamul Congress, the Stalinist-led state government then announced that it was imposing a unilateral "solution" to the Singur dispute. All the ex-Singur peasants, those who accepted the earlier government offer and those who rejected it, are to be given 50

percent greater financial compensation—a de facto admission that the original compensation was woefully inadequate. Laborers are promised work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee program, which pays India's poor about a dollar US per day for hard, menial labor.

Thus far the improved government offer has been spurned by the overwhelming majority of the farmers. On Monday it was announced that just 45 had signed up for the compensation package and that the state government is extending to the middle of this week its offer of an extra 10 percent payment to those who quickly agree to the new terms of sale.

According to the *Telegraph*, a right-wing Kolkata daily, "both the parties [i.e., the Communist Party (Marxist) or CPM and the Trinamul Congress] have adopted the same tactic" in trying to get farmers to accept or reject the deal—"confuse if you cannot convince and follow it up with veiled threats."

Mounting opposition to the Left Front's pro-investor policies

The Stalinists are petrified that the Singur land agitation will derail their attempts to woo big business through pro-investor policies, including privatization, social spending cuts, the setting up of Special Economic Zones, and the effective banning of strikes in the Information Technology and IT-enabled sectors.

A key factor in the unraveling of the September 7 agreement was Tata's complaints that the Stalinists had agreed to the Trinamul Congress's demand that some of the 1,000 expropriated acres be put back into agricultural production without first consulting with the auto-maker to determine whether this might impact on its plans to have a host of ancillary companies establish facilities at Singur.

More generally, the Stalinists have been at pains to demonstrate their subservience to big business. Last month as the Singur agitation was getting underway, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharya pledged before a big business audience that in future he will publicly oppose the one-day strikes his party calls in protest against the right-wing socio-economic policies of the central government.

Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath has warned that the Singur agitation "is not good for the investment image of India and will affect the country's image as an investment destination."

"We don't want war"

In recent days the Stalinists have swung back and forth between pleas to Trinamul Congress leader Mamata Bannerjee to "see reason" and wind up the protest movement for the "good of West Bengal" and veiled threats of

violence.

Speaking at a public meeting September 14, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya declared, “We don’t want war, we want industry. We’ve raised compensation for the farmers and landless farmers will also be compensated.”

Bhattacharya’s reference to “war” was more than a rhetorical flourish. In grabbing land for Indian and foreign capital, the Stalinists have resorted to mass violence, most infamously twice last year at Nandigram, the intended site for a massive chemical hub to be established by the Indonesian-based Salim Group. (See: “West Bengal’s Stalinist government mounts terror campaign to quash peasant unrest” and “West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre”)

If the Stalinists have thus far refrained from using mass violence to break up the Singur agitation, it is for fear that such action would further expose them as enforcers for big business and could well spin out of control. The state government lost effective control over Nandigram for ten months last year.

Another reason the Stalinists are proceeding with caution is that the Left Front’s relations with India’s Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government have changed dramatically as a result of its having withdrawn parliamentary support for the UPA government last July. This decision was effectively forced on the Stalinists by the Congress’ determination to press forward with implementation of the Indo-US nuclear treaty, the cornerstone of a new Indo-US “global” strategic partnership.

The Congress Party, especially at the state-level, has been encouraging the Trinamul Congress in its agitation against the Left Front government and is laying the groundwork for an alliance with the TMC in the coming national election.

External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, the most important Congress politician from West Bengal, did warn this past weekend about the negative impact of a Tata pullout from the state.

Nonetheless, the Stalinists have to be concerned that their erstwhile Congress/UPA allies might use violence at Singur as a pretext to invoke Article 356 of the Constitution and place the state under “presidents’ rule.”

Trinamul Congress leader Mamata Bannerjee has repeatedly called for New Delhi to intervene and on Sunday said that she would be urging the central government to employ Article 356 to oust the Left Front government.

A right-wing demagogue

Bannerjee is a right-wing demagogue, who is seeking to harness the mounting popular discontent against the Stalinists’ pro-investor policies to her drive to push West Bengal even further right.

While posing as a friend of the peasants she has repeatedly voiced her support for the Tata car project.

In recent weeks she has blown hot and cold over whether the agitation will be resumed. On Sunday she threatened to relaunch it in seven days if the government did not turn over 400 acres in Singur for farming, including 300 acres that are now part of the Tata complex.

Behind this vacillation is her recognition that many in the UPA government and ruling class fear that the Singur protest could encourage opposition to other land expropriations and thereby cut across their plans to attract investment by establishing more than 200 Special Economic Zones across India.

At the same time, she senses that she has rattled the government and cannot be sure of carrying the Singur peasants behind her unless the

government makes further concessions.

That Bannerjee has been able to cast herself in the role of spokeswoman for West Bengal’s impoverished peasantry is a searing indictment of the Stalinists.

Bannerjee has a decades-long record of defending big business and virulent anti-communism. She joined the Congress as a student in the 1970s, a decade that saw Indira Gandhi’s Congress government come into headlong conflict with India’s toilers, ultimately resorting to de facto martial law under the 1975-77 “Emergency.” In West Bengal, the Congress-led government, prior to its unseating by the Left Front in the 1977 elections, routinely used repression and outright violence to suppress strikes and peasant agitations directed against rampant landlordism.

It was the land-reform carried out by the Left Front in its first year in office that for decades assured it of majority electoral support in rural West Bengal.

Bannerjee served as a minister in the Congress government that in 1991 abandoned the Indian bourgeoisie’s decades-old program of state-led national development in favor of a drive to make India into a cheap-labor cog in production for the world capitalist market through sweeping tax and social spending cuts, “marketization,” and privatization.

In 1997 she spearheaded a West Bengali regional breakaway from the Congress, arguing that the national Congress leadership was not prepared to “fight” the West Bengal Left Front government, because it needed the Left’s support in opposing the BJP in national politics.

Shortly thereafter she struck an alliance with the Hindu supremacist BJP, serving off and on in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance that governed India from 1998 through May 2004. That government pressed forward with neo-liberal policies, including pushing through the initial Special Economic Zones legislation.

Maoists promote Bannerjee

Through their ruthless pursuit of big business policies—the Stalinists have forthrightly dismissed socialism “as a far off cry”—the CPM and its Left Front allies have created conditions in which Bannerjee and her TMC have been able to tap into the anger and despair of West Bengal’s oppressed peasantry, with the aim of politically emasculating it and harnessing it to the agenda of the right.

But an important secondary role in boosting Bannerjee has been played by an assortment of NGOs and split-offs from the CPM and the Communist Party of India, including Maoist groups. These organizations have allied with Bannerjee, thereby facilitating her attempts to pass herself off as a friend of the poor and oppressed.

Many of these self-proclaimed Marxist groups have actually become partners in Bannerjee’s newly-formed “People’s Secular Democratic Front” alongside the Muslim fundamentalist Jamaat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind.

The Socialist Unity Center of India or SUCI, a West Bengal-based group that split off from the Communist Party of India in 1948 and used to belong to Left Front, formed an electoral alliance with the TMC in last May’s panchayat (local) elections.

Bannerjee is quite conscious of the utility of such alliances in obscuring her reactionary pro-big business, pro-landlord record and aims. In explaining her electoral bloc with the SUCI, Bannerjee said, “Many people asked me why I accepted SUCI and I told them it was the need of the hour that we came together. In order to defeat the CPM, I am ready to accept all other leftist parties ... Our party will take their help where they have strong organizations.”

An idea of the extent to which the Maoists or Naxhalites are in the thrall of Mamata Bannerjee and promoting fatal illusions in her political

posturing is given by the remarks a leader of one such group recently made to the *Indian Express*. Purnendu Bose of the “Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) State Organizing Committee,” told the *Express* that Bannerjee consults with them “every evening” on every matter. “She will not act without taking us into confidence. We have been able to impress upon Mamata Bannerjee the need for such a mass movement against capitalism. She will never act without our consent.”

This of a lifelong bourgeois politician, who rallied to the Congress in the 1970s as it was violently lashing out against the working class, served in the government that initiated India’s neo-liberal reform program, and has worked in tandem with the Hindu supremacist BJP!

The Naxhalites, like the CPM, emerged out of the CPI, which by the early 1960s had been discredited by its dogged pursuit of an “anti-imperialist, anti-feudal” alliance with the big business Congress Party. The superficial character of the CPM’s break with the CPI was quickly demonstrated, as it sought to ally with various anti-Congress big business parties and strove to confine the working class to parliamentarism and trade union militancy.

The Naxhalites, meanwhile, sought to initiate a peasant-based “protracted people’s war” in the countryside, abandoning the working class to the CPI, CPM, and the union bureaucracy. The Indian state, with the connivance of the CPI and CPM, quickly crushed the initial isolated peasant rebellions and the Naxhalites soon splintered into a myriad of groupings. Some continue to wage “armed struggle” while developing all manner of opportunist alliances with bourgeois parties.

Some of the Naxhalite/Maoist groups justify their alliance with Bannerjee by invoking the Stalinist-opportunist perspective of allying with the “progressive” sections of the bourgeoisie, others by labeling the CPM “social fascist.”

All are bitterly opposed to the struggle for the political independence of the working class and the strategy of permanent revolution. To the bourgeoisie’s plans to “develop” India by binding it evermore tightly to the world capitalist economy, they do not counterpose the struggle for the international unity of the working class to overthrow capitalism, which would make the resources of the world available to the Indian people. Rather they call for a “new democratic revolution” in alliance with sections of the bourgeoisie with the purported aim of securing freedom from imperialism on a national basis.

The working class must oppose the Left Front government and its “industrialization policy,” which consists of transforming the state into a cheap-labor haven for Indian and international capital. But it must do so by resolutely breaking with all the parties of the bourgeoisie and advancing its own program to rally the toilers in the fight for a workers and peasants government. In putting an end to capitalism, such a government would also liquidate landlordism, casteism, and other vestiges of India’s colonial oppression and belted capitalist development.



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