Indian Stalinists' "jail bharo": a political stunt

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8 April 2010

The Stalinist-led Left Front is today mounting a nation-wide agitation to protest the pro-big business economic policies being implemented by India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

In its recent budget, the UPA rewarded big business and the well-to-do with massive tax concessions, while cutting the real amount allocated to social spending. And under conditions where India's toilers have been punished by soaring prices—wholesale food price are up almost 20 percent on a year-to-year basis—the government hiked taxes on diesel and gasoline and reduced the fertilizer price subsidy.

Dubbed a "jail bharo" or "fill the jails" campaign, the agitation calls for members and supporters of the four-party Left Front to picket central government buildings in district capitals across India and, in imitation of the movement for Indian independence, deliberately court arrest. Left Front leaders claim that more than 2.5 million people—many of them mobilized by trade union, *kisan* (peasant), and student organizations affiliated with either the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] or the Communist Party of India (CPI)—will join the agitation.

Working class militancy in India, as around the world, is rising in response to the ruling class' drive to make working people foot the bill for the capitalist crisis, through social spending cuts, regressive tax increases, lay offs, wage cuts and other concessions.

India's corporate elite was shaken by the outpouring of popular support for striking auto parts workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt last fall. Currently 450,000 teachers and other public sector employees are on strike in Jammu and Kashmir and have continued their strike even after the state government invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act. Workers at BSNL, a publicly-owned telecommunications firm, are threatening to launch an indefinite strike beginning April 20 to oppose the UPA government's plans to eliminate 100,000 jobs and sell-off a 30 percent stake in the company. 800,000 coal miners and ancillary workers have vowed to mount a three-day strike at the beginning of May unless the UPA government abandons disinvestment (partial privatization) plans for their industry.

The Left Front's "jail bharo" is the opposite, however, of an agitation aimed at developing an independent political movement of the working class and toilers against the Congress-led UPA government and the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism.

The Left Front protest is directed at containing the growing anger in the working class and other oppressed layers and channeling it into yet another futile attempt to pressure the big business Congress-led UPA into pursuing "pro-people" policies. A second purpose is to bolster the Left Front's increasingly threadbare credentials as an oppositional, anti-big business force.

The Left Front, it need be recalled, helped stitch together the Congress-led UPA coalition following the shock defeat of the BJP in the May 2004 election. Then for the next four years, it sustained the UPA in office with its parliamentary votes. The Stalinists justified their support for the UPA on the grounds that it was susceptible to mass pressure—although they had to concede that it pursued socio-economic policies little different than the BJP-led government that preceded it—and by arguing that support for the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, was the only way to block the BJP's return to power.

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Ultimately it was Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi who chose to break their alliance with the Left, so as to implement the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty and thereby cement a "global strategic partnership" with US imperialism.

The Stalinists' perspective of pressuring the big business UPA government is exemplified by their slogan "the Manmohan government must come to its senses and curb the price escalations."

The Left Front has said that if the UPA government does not rescind the diesel and gasoline price rise, it will refuse to cooperate with the government in parliament. "If the government does not listen," wrote Communist Party of India (Marxist) General-Secretary Prakash Karat in the party's English weekly *People's Democracy*, "we will work against it for the rest of the budget session."

The Stalinists have even threatened to join with the "other secular" parties, that is a host of regionalist and caste-ist parties that oscillate between the Congress and BJP, to defeat the budget bill.

But Karat hastened to make clear that this should not be taken too seriously. "The fight within parliament," he declared, "is not some design to topple the government. It is part of the political struggle to isolate the ruling party and to carry forward the fight to reverse the retrograde policies."

Rhetoric aside, the Stalinists clearly are reconciled to the Congress-led UPA remaining in office for the foreseeable future. They continue to propagate the notion that it is a "lesser evil" to the Hindu supremacist BJP. But even were the Stalinists to take a more oppositional stance toward the government, it would only be from the standpoint of supporting an alternative capitalist coalition. In the May 2009 Lok Sabha (general) election, the Stalinists, having been shunned by the UPA, championed a so-called Third Front. This included parties like the TDP and AIDMK that are notorious for their role in implementing neo-liberal reforms and otherwise attacking the working class.

In those elections, the Left Front suffered an electoral debacle, with its parliamentary delegation cut from more than 60 to just 24. This debacle was a consequence of the Left's right wing maneuvers on the national parliamentary stage, but it was also a popular repudiation of the pro-investor policies that the Left has pursued in the three states where it forms the government, West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura.

Deriding "socialism as a far off cry," the Left Front government in West Bengal has banned strikes in the IT and IT-enabled sector and used police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to land expropriations for Special Economic Zones.

Since the May 2009 election, the West Bengal government has moved even further to the right. It has provided crucial political support to the UPA government's decision to mount a nationally-coordinated counter-insurgency war against Maoists guerrillas so that India's tribal regions can be opened up for mega-resource exploitation projects. At the same time, it has repeatedly urged the Congress Party to break with the Trinumul Congress (TMC), a virulently right wing Bengali regionalist party that has had some success in exploiting popular opposition to the Left Front government. Leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the dominant partner in the Left Front, have repeatedly suggested that their party would be a more responsible ally for the Congress than the TMC. As proof they have held up their record of supporting the UPA in parliament from May 2004 through June 2008.

The Stalinist parliamentary parties have for decades functioned as an integral part of the bourgeois political establishment. The Indian working class needs a new program and a new party based on the perspective of Permanent Revolution—the recognition that the eradication of landlordism, caste oppression and the resolution of the other burning democratic problems will only prove possible as part of the socialist struggle against Indian and world capitalism.

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