

Amid mounting popular anger over price rises

## Indian Stalinists stage one-day protest strike

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The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allies in the Left Front are joining today with nine regional- and caste-based parties in staging an all-India *hartal*—or national strike—to protest the recent decision of India’s Congress Party-led central government to raise gasoline, diesel, and fertilizer prices.

The one-day protest strike comes in the midst of mounting popular anger over price increases and a growing wave of worker struggles.

According to government figures, wholesale prices are currently rising at an annual rate of 9.9 percent and wholesale food prices by more than 17 percent. It is a rule of thumb in India that retail prices rise much more quickly than wholesale prices. Thus the hundreds of millions of Indian workers and peasants who live on less than a dollar per day are now contending with food prices rises of 25 percent and more.

Recent months have seen several militant job actions. These include a walkout of more than a hundred thousand workers in an industrial belt in Gurgaon in support of striking auto parts workers and a strike earlier this month by 450,000 public sector workers in the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir mounted in defiance of a draconian anti-strike law.

Last week 300,000 workers at BSNL, a government-owned telecommunications company, walked off the job, only to have the unions, including those affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, call off their action without the government in any way backing away from its plans to sell off a major share of the company and eliminate 100,000 jobs. 800,000 coal miners and ancillary workers are poised to mount their own strike against government disinvestment plans starting May 5.

Today’s *hartal*, however, is not aimed at mobilizing the working class as an independent political force, with a view to rallying the other oppressed toilers in a struggle against capitalist rule and for a workers’ and peasants’

government.

Rather it is directed at harnessing and subordinating the growing popular anger and unrest to the parliamentary maneuvers of the Left Front, whose constituent parties have for decades functioned as an integral part of India’s bourgeois political establishment.

A second and related aim of today’s protest is to burnish the Left Front’s tattered credentials as an oppositional, anti-big business force. The Left Front was the biggest loser in the May 2009 election, with the bulk of its losses coming in its West Bengal bastion as the result of a popular backlash against the Left Front state government’s pursuit of pro-investor policies.

The *hartal* has been timed to coincide with the presentation by the Left Front and its purported “secular” non-Congress Party allies of a “cut” motion on the floor of India’s parliament. This motion instructs the government to roll back the hike in excise and custom duties on petrol (gasoline) and diesel contained in the recent budget.

Because the cut motion concerns a money bill, the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government would be forced, under India’s parliamentary system, to resign were the cut motion to pass.

The Stalinists, however, have been at pains to insist that they do not seek the government’s defeat—a point underlined by their decision to present a “cut motion” rather than a motion of non-confidence in the government.

Communist Party of India (Marxist) General-Secretary Prakash Karat and other senior party leaders have repeatedly declared that their aim is to compel the UPA to pursue “pro-people” policies not defeat it.

The editorial in the current issue of *People’s Democracy*, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)’s English language weekly, declares, “The objective of this nationwide *hartal* is not the destabilisation of the central government. Its objective is very simple: force the

government through public pressure mounted both outside and inside parliament to roll back the backbreaking hikes in the prices of petrol, diesel and fertilisers.”

The editorial concludes by claiming that “a powerful people’s mobilisation ... will force this government to act in the interests of the people as against its current pre-occupation with bolstering super profits for the rich.”

This is hardly a novel position for the Stalinists. For four years, from May 2004 through June 2008, the Left Front was a de facto member of the UPA coalition, providing it with the parliamentary votes needed to sustain it in offices and playing a role in the formulation of the UPA’s policies that was second only to that of the Congress itself.

The Stalinists’ justified their support for the UPA on the grounds that the Congress Party—the premier party of the Indian bourgeoisie—was susceptible to popular pressure and with the claim that it would be possible to combine pro-market reforms with pro-people policies, to put into practice the Congress’ demagogic 2004 campaign slogan of “reform, but with a human face.” The Left Front further argued that only by supporting a Congress-led government would it be possible to bar the return to power of the Hindu supremacist BJP.

Ultimately, it was the Congress Party that chose to break the alliance with the Left Front, when it pressed forward with implementation of the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord, an initiative meant to cement a global strategic partnership between the Indian bourgeoisie and US imperialism.

Some two years later, when under the impact of the world economic crisis, the UPA government has presented a rightwing budget that rewards big business with further tax concessions, slashes social spending in real terms, and accelerates disinvestment (privatization), the Stalinists again come forward to insist that the working class must orientate toward pressuring the UPA.

The Stalinists’ role in subordinating the working class to the India’s ruling elite is further underscored by their “Third Front”—i.e. their “non-Congress, non-BJP” alliance with a motley assortment of caste-and regional based parties, including the Samajwadi Party (SP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), AIADMK, Biju Janata Dal (BJD), and Telugu Desam Party (TDP).

All of these parties have previously been members of Congress- or BJP-led coalition governments and all have implemented pro-big business market reforms. The BJD, which long was partnered with the BJP in governing

Orissa, is notorious for its support for big business mega-projects that have dispossessed hundreds of thousands of tribal people. The TDP government of Andhra Pradesh was feted by the World Bank for its implementation of neo-liberal reforms and in 2002 the AIADMK government of Tamil Nadu used arrests and mass firings to break a government workers’ strike.

Yet the Stalinists are tying today’s *hartal* to their maneuvers with these retrograde parties, which represent various regionally-based section of Indian capital, and promoting them as a “progressive” alternative to the Congress and BJP.

On the eve of today’s *hartal* the Indian media was reporting that the Samajwadi Party and RJD and possibly other of the Left Front’s allies were in secret discussions with the Congress Party leadership about today’s cut motion vote.

While the Congress leadership has proclaimed it a certainty that the UPA will prevail on the cut motion vote, such an outcome, given the complexity of India’s parliamentary arithmetic, is not guaranteed.

If the UPA retains the support of a dozen parties with a lone MP as well as most of the 9 independent MPs, it should secure a majority. It will likely also be supported by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the ruling party in Uttar Pradesh. But so as not to take any chances, the Congress party leadership has been courting several parties ostensibly in the pro-*hartal* camp.

According to a report in the *Times of India*, in the run-up to the cut motion vote, the “SP and RJD seemed to be dilly-dallying on the issue and may use” the *hartal* “as a pretext to keep away from the lower house (of parliament) Tuesday.”

Whatever ultimately happens in today’s vote, this maneuvering only underscores the fraudulent and reactionary character of the Stalinists’ alliance with the non-Congress “secular” parties.



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