

India: West Bengal government forms industrial security force

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Responding to a call by the national government, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI M)-led government in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal is forming a special State Industrial Security Force (SISF) to protect business operations against striking workers and protesters.

The decision underscores the anti-working class character of this Stalinist party and highlights its unity with the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) central government in protecting the interests of the big industrialists and transnational corporations.

Several other states, including Maharashtra, Orissa and Himachal Pradesh, have also moved to establish their own SISFs amid growing class struggles throughout the country. In asking the state governments to build their own forces, the national home minister Palaniappan Chidambaram complained that the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) could not cope with its growing workload.

The national government is simultaneously boosting the CISF. Originally established in 1969, the 105,000-strong force will be expanded to 145,000 officers in coming years. In addition to being deployed at 269 public sector units throughout India, CISF troops provide security for corporate and cooperative businesses. The Indian parliament authorised that wider role in February 2009.

According to West Bengal's home secretary Ardhendu Sen, the SISF will consist of 1,000 troops initially—one battalion for the state capital Kolkata and another for the rest of the state. The immediate reason given by the Left Front for creating the SISF was an

allegation by three industrialists that they had received telephone threats demanding ransoms. But there is no doubt that the force will be used against workers' struggles, including strikes and factory occupations.

Class tensions were already high in February, when the state governments first discussed forming SISFs. Industrial action at this time included a two-day strike by 10,000 university teachers in New Delhi, a march by 5,000 jute mill workers at Vishakapatnam in southern India, a strike by over 3,000 contract workers at the Steel Authority of India Limited, and a strike by nearly 30,000 power workers in the western state of Maharashtra. In West Bengal, a strike by over 250,000 workers attached to 52 jute mills had entered its third month.

More recently, on April 1 an estimated 55,000 auto-rickshaw drivers in Delhi struck for 24 hours, demanding a fare increase and shelters at terminal stands. From April 3 to 14, more than 450,000 government employees from Jammu and Kashmir struck for 12 days, demanding pay arrears and defying the state government's threats to sack them en masse. On April 20, about 300,000 workers in Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL), the government-owned telecommunication company, launched a nationwide indefinite strike against government's restructuring plans, although their unions quickly called off the strike.

The state governments have offered various pretexts for establishing SISFs. The Maharashtra government seized on the terror attack in the state capital Mumbai in November 2008. The Orissa government cited the protection of mining and industrial operations against

attacks by Maoist guerrillas. The Andhra Pradesh government also referred to Maoist threats.

The Himachal Pradesh government gave a clear indication that its SISF was directed against the working class. Its forest minister, J.P. Nadda, said the state had “attracted massive investment in the industrial, Hydel power and tourism sectors in the recent years” and the rapid growth “made the setting up of an exclusive force for maintaining industrial peace and law and order in industrial townships inevitable”.

The West Bengal government’s formation of a SISF flows from its program of wooing local and foreign investors at the expense of working people and rural toilers. In March 2007, the Left Front government sent its police and armed CPI(M) members to suppress a rebellion of farmers against the government’s appropriation of their land for a special economic zone in Nandigram, 150 kilometres from Kolkata. Fourteen farmers were killed in the attack. Seven months later, armed CPI(M) goons attacked Nandigram villagers, killing at least eight.

In February 2008, the West Bengal police open fire on a protest against the government’s pro-market industrialisation program in Dihata, 730 kilometres north of Kolkata. More than 10,000 people participated in the protest and five were killed in the police shooting. The CPI(M)-led government has banned strikes in the IT and IT-enabled sectors in a bid to attract investment to those sectors.

As a result, the government has won praise from big business. According to a recent survey by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), the state’s Business Confidence Index stands at 6.5 on a scale of 10. ASSOCHAM secretary general D.S. Rawat noted that the state had received investments of up to 5,300 billion rupees (\$US120 billion) during the year to September 2009. He complimented the government for its industry-friendly budget, particularly for allocating an additional 20 billion rupees to boost the state economy. “By providing adequate thrust to IT, tourism, chemicals and petrochemicals and food processing, the government is working on the right direction,” he added.

Nationally, the CPI(M)-led Left Front provides a crucial prop for capitalist rule. It shares the pro-market agenda of the Congress-led UPA central government, which it backed for four years until 2008. On the eve of the national general elections in 2009, CPI(M) leaders kept open the option of backing a Congress-led government again. However, because the UPA won a higher number of seats, just 13 short of an absolute majority, the Left Front was not asked for direct parliamentary backing.

Today, the CPI(M) aids the UPA government by channelling the growing opposition by workers and other toilers to the government’s policies into harmless protest movements. CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat has reiterated that the party would not topple the UPA government. The CPI(M) enthusiastically collaborates with the Congress-led central government in its military operations against Maoist guerrillas, known as Naxalites. The West Bengal government has unleashed its police forces in a joint operation with central para-military forces against the Maoists in the state’s tribal areas.

By establishing an SISF, the Left Front government is demonstrating its willingness to extend its partnership with the national government to suppressing workers fighting to defend their basic rights and conditions.



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