Sabotage of West Bengal train leads to 148 deaths, sparks reactionary political furor

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One hundred forty-eight people were killed and scores more injured in rural West Bengal last week, when a freight train struck a passenger train that had derailed due to track sabotage.

No group has claimed responsibility for the crash-derailment of the Jnaneswari Express, which occurred shortly after midnight on May 28 near Sardiha, a town lying about 150 kilometers west of Kolkata.

West Bengal's Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government immediately pinned the blame for the Jnaneswari Express tragedy on the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and vowed to intensify its drive to reassert state control over impoverished tribal areas in the western part of the state where the Maoists have gained significant support. "All our efforts," declared West Bengal Chief Minister and Communist Party of India (Marxist) Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, "have to be directed against this menace; on how the State and the country can be liberated from this threat."

This is all grist for the mill of India's Congress Party-led central government. Declaring the Maoists the country's foremost domestic security threat, India's government has launched an unprecedented nationwide counter-insurgency campaign—Operation Green Hunt—involving upwards of 70,000 army-trained paramilitaries. Its aim, as has been conceded by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, is to pacify the country's eastern tribal belt so that its plentiful mineral and forest resources can be opened up to domestic and foreign capital.

Home Minister P. Chidambaram and Defence Minister A.K. Antony have seized on last week's derailment and crash to reopen debate over whether India's military should take a more active role in the counter-insurgency war. "We are carefully examining all pros and cons," said Antony on May 31. "Once a decision is made it will be binding on the military." Till now, the military has successfully resisted pressure to go beyond proving training and logistical support to the paramilitary forces of the central and state governments. The top brass' fear is that frontline participation in a difficult and increasingly deadly counter-insurgency war will sap morale and undermine public support for the military and the ongoing drive to massively expand its weaponry.

While the Stalinists of the Left Front, Chidambaram, Antony, Prime Minister Singh, and the corporate media all sought to exploit the understandable public revulsion over the death toll on the Jnaneswari Express to rally support for Operation Green Hunt, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the official opposition in the West Bengal legislature and the second largest constituent of the Congress Party-led governing coalition, took a very different stand. Mamata Banerjee, the head of the TMC and India's Railway Minister, did not only reject the Left Front government's rush to hold the Maoists responsible for the Jnaneswari Express tragedy before any serious investigation had been undertaken. She repeatedly insinuated that the crash was the result of a political conspiracy mounted by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) with a view to discrediting her and the TMC just two days before municipal polls were to be held in Kolkata and 80 other West Bengal cities and towns.

Banerjee urged the populace "not to give a single vote" to those who had conspired against her. "One may be politically against us, but engineering this incident for political gain is unfortunate."

Banerjee is a notorious right-winger. A virulent anti-communist, she has repeatedly made common cause with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But since her party was routed in the 2006 state assembly elections she has politically made herself over, by posturing as a spokesman of the peasantry and criticizing the Left Front government's pro-investor "industrialization policy."

If she has had some success in this—her party delivered a drubbing to the Left Front in last year's national election and as a result of last week's civic elections will rule outright or be the dominant partner in the government of Kolkata and some 50 other West Bengal municipalities—it is due first and foremost to the rightwing policies of the CPM and its Left Front. West Bengal's Left Front has outlawed strikes in the IT-sector, used police and goon violence to suppress opposition to its expropriation of peasant holdings for Special Economic Zones, and increasingly relied on the corrupt state bureaucracy and security forces to quell opposition.

A second significant factor in Banerjee's political rise is the support that she has received from a number of pseudo-socialist groups, including the Maoists. Characterizing the Left Front as "social fascist," Maoist spokesmen have indicated that they support Banerjee becoming West Bengal Chief Minister.

Initially the Maoists angrily rejected the West Bengal Left Front government's charge that they were responsible for the crash-derailment. Indeed, they echoed and amplified Banerjee's charges about CPM responsibility for the sabotage and solidarized themselves with the Congress Party ally and UPA minster.

Asit Mahato, a leader of the Maoist-aligned People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA), accused the CPM of conspiring "to create panic by triggering a train mishap" so as to "malign us." Defending Banerjee, Mahato claimed, "CPM had plans to politically isolate Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee so that she is forced to resign under directive of the UPA government after the train mishap."

Subsequently, however, CPI (Maoist) spokesmen made several statements of a much more defensive character. Maoist state committee member Akash promised a probe to determine if rogue members or supporters were responsible for the deployment. The BBC reported Akash as saying, "Anybody, even if they are found close to us, will be punished if their involvement is proved beyond doubt."

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These statements suggest that the Maoists may indeed have been responsible for the derailment. As the West Bengal government and Union Home Minister Chidambaram have been eager to point out, the Maoists had previously carried out derailments in this part of West Bengal.

For their part, West Bengal police authorities have indicated they think that the derailment went awry, that the intended target was the freight train, not the passenger train.

Still, it cannot be excluded at this point that other forces may have staged or orchestrated the derailment in an attempt to whip up support for Operation Green Hunt.

Significantly, while making strident accusations against the CPM, the Maoists have not even hinted that India's security agencies might have had a hand in the crash-derailment

As a result of the politically-motivated charges and counter-charges about responsibility for the Jnaneshwari Express deaths a number of crucial contributing factors to the tragedy have been obscured.

The derailment took place some ten minutes before the freight train arrived on the scene. Yet the driver of the freight train was apparently not alerted to the disaster ahead. Why not?

A major reason for the large number of fatalities was the lack of prompt medical care. It took two hours for emergency workers to arrive on the scene due to the poor state of the roads and lack of vehicles.

Needless to say, a serious probing of these issues could prove politically embarrassing to both the railway minister Banerjee and to the Left Front, which has ruled West Bengal for the past 33 years.

The Jnaneshwari Express train tragedy has demonstrated yet again the utter bankruptcy of individual terrorism as a means for advancing the interests of the working class and oppressed masses.

It is in the nature of terrorist acts—which are carried out clandestinely by small numbers of people—that one frequently cannot distinguish where misguided retrograde politics ends and state conspiracies begin.

Moreover, such violence contributes nothing to the political education and mobilization of the working class in the fight for its own class interests. Rather, terrorist acts sow political confusion and provide the ruling elite with arguments to justify the building up of the forces of repression.

The political furor sparked by the Jnaneshwari Express crash-derailment has also thrown into relief the reactionary role being played by both of the rival wings of Indian Stalinism, by the parliamentarist CPM and its Left Front and by the guerrillaist Communist Party of India (Maoist).

For decades the CPM and its longtime Left Front ally, the Communist Party of India, have functioned as an integral part of the Indian establishment, subordinating the working class to one right-wing parliamentary alliance after another.

The CPM played a pivotal role in the bringing to power of a Congress Party-led government after the 2004 Indian elections, corralling various regional and caste-based parties into the newly minted United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and helping to write its ostensible governmental program. The Left propped up the UPA government for the next four years, even as it pressed forward with pro-market policies little different from those of the BJP-led government that preceded it. Ultimately, it was the Congress Party that chose to part ways with the Left Front, effectively ejecting the Stalinists from the government so it could finalize the Indo-US nuclear accord and a global strategic partnership with imperialism.

Two years on, the CPM continues to chase after an alliance with the Congress Party. The Stalinists have repeatedly appealed to Manmohan Singh to recognize that it is a more reliable and dependable ally than Banerjee and her TMC, not least because it is fully committed to working with the Center to deal with India's "greatest domestic security threat," i.e. to suppressing the Maoists.

The Maoists employ blood-curdling "revolutionary" rhetoric, but they play a complimentary role to the parliamentary Stalinist parties, the CPM and CPI, in politically disorienting and emasculating the working class. They champion the peasantry—that is oppressed petty proprietors—and increasingly the tribals, who have been confined to the most remote and economically backward regions of the country, as the principal revolutionary force. Their "protracted people's war" confines workers to the role of spectators to a distant armed struggle that has as its object pressuring the Indian ruling elite for increased social-welfare spending and other reforms. This goes hand-in-hand with all sorts of sordid maneuvers with capitalist politicians. The Maoists stated goal is to bring about a national-democratic revolution against feudalism and the "comprador" sections of capital through a multi-class alliance that is to include "progressive" and "patriotic" elements within the bourgeoisie.

Notwithstanding the bitter and bloody rivalry between the CPM and the CPI (Maoist), both Stalinist parties insist that the struggle for socialism is not on the historic agenda in India. While the CPM chases after the Congress and other parliamentary partners, the Maoists are aligned with Mamata Banerjee who is herself a key member of the national Congress Party-led government and is spearheading the bourgeoisie's drive to replace the CPM-Left Front government in West Bengal with an even more explicitly right-wing regime.

Home Minister Chidambaram derided Banerjee's claims about last week's derailment and train crash. But the Congress Party also reiterated its commitment to working with the TMC to unseat the Left Front in the coming state assembly elections. Banerjee is appealing to the Congress-led central government to advance the elections to this fall, hoping to capitalize on her current popularity, but they must in any event be held no later than Spring 2011.

The events in West Bengal underscore the urgency of the working class and socialist-minded youth and intellectuals breaking with all strands of Stalinism and fighting to build a new revolutionary socialist party based on the program of permanent revolution. The working class must place itself at the head of all the toilers and oppressed in a struggle against Indian and world capitalism. India's enduring legacy of imperialist oppression and belated capitalist development—as manifested in the persistence of landlordism, casteism, and numerous other unresolved democratic problems—will only be overcome through the overthrow of the Indian bourgeoisie, which consolidated its rule in 1947 through the suppression of the anti-imperialist and emancipatory mass movement that convulsed South Asia in the first half of the 20th century.

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