

Indian Stalinists split over what right-wing course to follow

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Last week's one-day national *bandh* or general strike against central government-imposed fuel price hikes has exposed a growing rift within India's principal Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

The long-developing rift pits the leadership of the party's unit in West Bengal, where the CPM-led Left Front has formed the state government for the past 33 years, against the national party leadership.

At issue is what right-wing path the CPM should follow: Should it be seeking to renew a partnership with the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's premier political party and leader of the current United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government, or should it ally with the opposition parties, including potentially the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)?

For four years, beginning in May 2004, the Left Front provided the UPA with its parliamentary majority. But in July 2008 it withdrew its support when the Congress Party pressed forward with the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty—a treaty conceived as a means of cementing a “global strategic” partnership with US imperialism.

West Bengal CPM and government leaders have attacked the national CPM leadership for making common cause with the BJP in last week's *bandh*. They argue that by so doing the national leadership have undermined the Left Front's claim to be the foremost opponent of communalism and damaged the CPM's efforts to win Muslim support in next year's West Bengal state election.

The CPM national leadership has claimed that the protest strike it mounted July 5 in conjunction with its Left Front partners and various regional and caste-based parties was completely independent of, and separate from, the walkout called by the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA). However, it has come to light that Left leaders were in close contact with the NDA's convenor in the run-up to the walkout. And in trumpeting the strike's success, the CPM leadership made little if any distinction between those mobilized under the Left Front's banners and those who protested at the call of the BJP. Only belatedly did CPM leaders even mention that it was the BJP, when it led India's government in 2002, that first sought to decontrol fuel prices.

The CPM national leadership's insistence that there has been no change in its attitude toward the BJP was badly undermined when on the eve of the *bandh* the ex-head of the BJP, L.K. Advani, revealed that during the recent budget session of parliament two Left Front leaders, one from the CPM and the other from the Communist Party of India (CPI), had met with the BJP's parliamentary chief to discuss joint opposition to various UPA government initiatives.

The West Bengal CPM leadership quickly sought to disassociate itself from the meeting with the BJP's Sushma Swaraj and to use it to attack the policy of the national party leadership. “In Bengal,” declared a CPM government minister and party state committee member, “we have a 25 percent Muslim population of which a large section has left us ... After all this, if our party leaders visit BJP offices for parliamentary business or for any other reason, it may lead to further erosion of support.”

No doubt the West Bengal CPM leadership is concerned about the electoral impact of the CPM national leadership's overtures to the BJP. Since winning re-election in 2006 on an openly pro-big business “industrialization” policy plank, the Left Front has suffered a series of electoral debacles in West Bengal. Its defeat in the coming state elections is widely anticipated.

But concern about the CPM's overtures toward the BJP were not the reason that West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee sought an exemption for West Bengal from the July 5 *bandh* at the July 3-4 Politburo meeting, then walked out of the meeting when the exemption was refused.

Bhattacharjee has repeatedly complained about *bandhs* and other forms of popular protest because they cut across his campaign to make West Bengal India's most investor-friendly state. In 2005 when a similar one-day *bandh* disrupted work at the IT and IT-enabled companies located in and around Kolkata, Bhattacharjee rushed to reassure big business that it would never be allowed to happen again.

If the West Bengal Left Front now faces imminent electoral defeat, it is because its corruption and right-wing policies, including anti-strike laws and the shooting down of peasants protesting the expropriation of their land for Special Economic Zones, have alienated Bengal's workers and toilers.

The response of Bhattacharjee and the West Bengal Stalinist has been to shift still further right. They are seeking to cling to power by convincing big business that the Left Front is the best guarantor of their profits and best enforcer of their diktats.

Bhattacharjee openly promoted the CPM as the protector of order against anarchy at a function held June 21 to mark 33 years of Left Front rule. “What,” he asked, “is this change being demanded by the Opposition parties?” then replied, “[T]he kind of change being sought will result in anarchy.”

Referring to the opposition Trinamool Congress's attempt to exploit peasants' anger over the government's expropriation of their land for a

Tata car manufacturing plant at Singur, Bhattacharjee further asked, “Will West Bengal be witness to only Singurs where investment will be turned away?”

In line with this right-wing course, the West Bengal CPM is desperately appealing to the Congress Party, which while the largest party in India’s national parliament is only the third party in West Bengal, to repudiate its electoral pact with the Trinamool Congress (TMC).

However, the Congress Party has emphatically rejected any such suggestion. Following the recent municipal elections, in which the TMC won a major victory despite the breakdown of seat-sharing negotiations with the Congress leadership, the Congress reaffirmed its alliance with the TMC, adding that the latter had won the right to lead the anti-Left Front forces in the coming state election.

The policy of the national CPM leadership is somewhat different but no less directed against the fundamental interests of the working class.

Under conditions where there is a mounting wave of militant struggle in opposition to food price rises and the UPA government’s push to privatize or partially privatize public sector units, it is working to contain and constrain the working class within the straitjacket of protests aimed at pressuring the UPA to adopt “pro-people” policies and parliamentary maneuvers with the opposition parties.

Its alliance with the UPA having collapsed in 2008 because the Congress effectively kicked the Left out of the government, the CPM promptly formed an alliance with a motley collection of erstwhile BJP and/or Congress allies, including the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), which broke a Tamil Nadu public sector strike in 2002 by implementing mass firings and hiring scabs. Another of its allies is the Telugu Desam Party, which when it last held office in Andhra Pradesh won accolades from the World Bank for its implementation of pro-market policies.

Now, with a view to retaining influence in the politics of the bourgeois establishment and make its parliamentary maneuvers appear more credible, the CPM is making overtures to the Hindu supremacist BJP. By so doing, the Stalinists are providing this crisis-ridden noxious communal party with legitimacy.

Nor can it be excluded that the Stalinists will not go further with these overtures—a course fraught with danger for the working class. For the past two decades the CPM has treated the BJP as a political untouchable and justified subordinating the working class to one right-wing pro-market reform government after another in the name of keeping the BJP from power. But it should not be forgotten that the CPM supported the coming to power of the Janata Party (into which the BJP’s forerunner the Jana Sangh had been dissolved) in 1977. And in 1989-90 it joined with the BJP to prop up the National Front government headed by Congress dissident V.P. Singh.

The split between the CPM’s West Bengal unit and the national party leadership is longstanding. It is well-known that the West Bengal Party leadership opposed the decision to withdraw support for the Congress-led UPA government in July 2008. It similarly opposed the expulsion of Somnath Chatterjee from the party for failing to follow the leadership’s instruction he resign the Lok Sabha Speaker’s post as part of the withdrawal of support for the UPA. Subsequently Chatterjee said that he would have voted to keep the UPA in office if he had had to exercise the Speaker’s deciding vote in the event of a tied non-confidence motion.

In a move meant to demonstrate its opposition to the national party leadership, West Bengal’s CPM-led Left Front government asked Chatterjee to give a lecture on July 8 commemorating the birthday of the late CPM West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. Bhattacharjee shared the platform with Chatterjee, but CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat and other top national leaders failed to show up.

In June there were media reports that Karat could be replaced by fellow Politburo member Sitaram Yechury, because the latter has better relations with the Congress party leadership.

Clearly the CPM is badly split. The loss of its West Bengal bastion and all the attendant perks and privileges that go with having controlled the government of India’s fourth most populous state for more than three decades would enormously exacerbate these divisions.

But what must be recognized is the basic commonality in the positions of the two factions.

There is no disagreement on the neo-liberal economic policies carried out by CPM-led governments in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura or with Bhattacharjee’s infamous claim that “socialism is a far-off cry.”

Karat continues to enthusiastically defend the pivotal role the CPM-led Left Front played in creating the UPA in 2004 and the support it gave the Congress-led government for the next four years.

Both factions support the West Bengal Left Front government’s participation in the central government’s anti-Maoist counter-insurgency war, Operation Green Hunt, the purpose of which is to suppress tribal opposition to the opening up of India’s eastern and central highlands for big business megaprojects aimed at exploiting the region’s forest and mineral wealth.

Last but not least, both factions stand full-square on the nationalist, class-collaborationist tradition of Indian Stalinism, which for more than 75 years has justified the political subordination of the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie on the grounds that the tasks of the democratic revolution have not been completed.

In fact, the historical experience of India tragically demonstrates the converse. Landlordism, casteism and other legacies of imperialist oppression and feudal backwardness will only be liquidated when the working class rallies the toilers around it in a successful struggle against Indian capitalism.

Indian workers and socialist-minded youth and intellectuals must draw the most far-reaching conclusions from the manifest political bankruptcy of the CPM and its Left Front. They are nothing less than props for the rule of the Indian bourgeoisie. What is above all required is a turn to Trotskyism, the contemporary expression of Marxism-Leninism.



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