

Indian Stalinists join BJP in one-day strike against fuel price hikes

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A one-day all-India *bandh*, or general strike, protesting the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's recent fuel price hikes and associated decision to deregulate petrol prices shut down much of the country Monday.

The strike was initiated by the Stalinist-led Left Front and supported by most of the opposition parties, including the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its multi-party coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

On June 24, the Congress Party-led UPA government hiked the price of petrol (gasoline) by 7 percent and that of diesel by 5 percent and announced the complete and immediate deregulation of petrol prices and the impending deregulation of diesel prices. The UPA government also raised the price of a cylinder of LPG (cooking gas) by 35 rupees (75 cents US) and a litre of kerosene by 3.5 rupees.

In much of India Monday's protest shut down air, rail, bus, and truck transport, closed shops, factories, schools and colleges, and disrupted Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled industries. The strike paralyzed life in those states where the Left or the BJP and its allies form the state government, including West Bengal, Kerala, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, and the Punjab. But the protest, reported the Chennai-based *Hindu*, also "evoked a significant response in several other states, including Congress-ruled Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi."

The widespread participation in the strike is an indication of mounting popular anger over rising prices and the rightwing socio-economic policies of the Congress-led UPA.

In the twelve months from May 2009 through May 2010, wholesale prices rose 10.2 percent and wholesale food prices by 16.5 percent. Pulse prices leaped 32.4 percent, sugar 26 percent, eggs, meat and fish 35 percent, and flour 16 percent—this in a country where hundreds of millions of people are malnourished and more than three-quarters of the population survives on less than \$2 US per day.

The Congress Party-led government concedes that its fuel price increases will lead to a further across-the-board spike in prices, but claims that it cannot sustain subsidized energy prices if it is to meet its pledge to domestic and international big business to dramatically reduce India's annual budget deficit.

Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee responded to Monday's protest by reiterating, "There is no question of a fuel price rollback."

The *bandh* call Monday, July 5 one-day morning of June 29 by the Left Front, an alliance led by the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India or CPI. In making this call, the Stalinists appealed to a motley collection of regional-and caste-based "secular" parties—all of them erstwhile allies of the Congress Party or the BJP—for support.

A few hours after the Left Front's *bandh* appeal, the BJP made its own call for a protest strike on July 5. Ostensibly the two protests were separate. Yet the Left parties did nothing to publicly distinguish their action from that of the BJP and it has now come to light that the Stalinists are seeking to coordinate "issue-based" opposition to the UPA government with the virulently rightwing, pro-big business BJP.

Big business lobby groups and the corporate media have angrily denounced Monday's protest. Both the *Wall Street Journal* and London-based *Financial Times* carried substantial reports on the *bandh*, indicating international capital's concern over mounting labor unrest in India. Recent months have seen a wave of strikes in India's auto sector, including a two-day occupation of a Hyundai plant, a wildcat strike by Air India personnel, and walkouts by telecom workers and coal miners against the UPA government's disinvestment (privatization) plans.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) claimed Monday's protest resulted in business losses of around 30 billion rupees (US\$640 million), while the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (AssoCham) placed the losses at 100 billion rupees (US\$2.1 billion). Nassacom, the body that represents India's IT-Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry, responded to Monday's *bandh* by saying such actions could threaten the country's position as a BPO powerhouse.

A Congress spokesman denounced the *bandh* as "anti-people" and "unconstitutional." Thousands of people were arrested during Monday's protest, as Congress-led state governments sought to break the strike, but virtually all were soon released without charge.

The Indian Stalinists and their union affiliates have a long history of calling one-day protest strikes with the aim of boosting their tattered left credentials and tying the working class and toilers to their parliamentary maneuvers with the capitalist parties.

The Left Front called several such one-day *bandhs* between May 2004 and June 2008 when they were propping up the UPA government in parliament and otherwise functioning as a de facto

member of the Congress-led government.

This past April, when the Stalinists tabled a cut-motion in parliament against the fuel tax increases contained in the UPA's latest budget, they publicly insisted that their aim was not to bring the government down, but rather to pressure the Congress into pursuing "pro-people" policies. (See, "*Amid mounting popular anger over price rises: Indian Stalinists stage one-day protest strike*")

That said, the Stalinists readiness to work in tandem with the BJP represents a further lurch to the right and one fraught with dangers for the working class.

For two decades, the Left Front has treated the Hindu supremacist BJP as a "political untouchable," pointing to its infamous record of inciting communal violence. Indeed, the Stalinists have repeatedly justified support for Congress-led governments that have pressed forward with socially incendiary pro-market reforms, including for the UPA government from 2004-8, on the grounds that only by allying with the Indian bourgeoisie's premier political party can the BJP be prevented from coming to power.

Fearing the reaction of the working class to their overtures to the BJP, the Stalinists publicly maintained that their *bandh* and that of the BJP were entirely separate. This was, to say the least, disingenuous. In the run-up to Monday's *bandh* the Stalinists were in close contact with NDA convenor and Janata Dal (United) leader Sharad Yadav, whose principal job is to coordinate the activities of the BJP-led alliance. Significantly, the Stalinists have frequently referred to the JD (U) as a "socialist party" in recent months, although the JD (U) has been the most important BJP ally for well over a decade, including when they jointly led India's government from 1998-2004. Currently it is in a governmental coalition with the BJP in Bihar.

The Stalinists' flirtation with the BJP goes well beyond this, however. On the eve of this week's *bandh*, L.K. Advani, the ex-head of the BJP, revealed on his blog that two senior leaders of the Left Front—CPI (M) Parliamentary leader Basudeb Acharya and CPI leader and All-India Trades Union Congress General Secretary Gurudas Dasgupta—had visited the office of BJP parliamentary leader Sushma Swaraj during the recent "budget" session of parliament.

Advani's purpose in exposing this meeting was to force the issue of Left Front-BJP collaboration. He hopes to compel the Stalinists to abandon their public stance of no cooperation with the BJP.

The CPM's Acharya issued an unconvincing denial, claiming that the meeting to which Advani had referred "did not have anything to do with co-ordination with the BJP."

Dasgupta was much more forthright. He told the Kolkata *Telegraph*: "I do not believe in political untouchability. I believe in fruitful co-operation. Acting simultaneously, however, does not mean coming together politically. Our differences with the BJP will always remain".

Mamata Banerjee, the boss of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the head of the TMC-Congress alliance that is seeking to oust the Left Front from power in West Bengal in next year's state election, immediately seized on Advani's blog to declare that the

CPM and "the communal BJP ... are two flowers on the same stalk".

This is rich coming from Banerjee, a notorious rightwing demagogue who has previously served as a Union cabinet minister in BJP-led governments.

For India's largely impoverished Muslim minority, however, it is chilling to learn that the Left Front is now making common cause with the BJP. No doubt many of the BJP leaders and activists who enforced Monday's strike call in the west Indian state of Gujarat—beginning with Chief Minister Narendra Modi—were complicit in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat.

The BJP's claim to oppose the fuel price hikes is a patent political fraud. It was the BJP, which as leader of the NDA government in 2002, first sought to deregulate fuel prices.

With a view to reassuring big business, Advani explained Monday that the BJP was compelled to protest the fuel price hike if it is to have any chance to win back popular support. Said Advani, "We had been hearing criticism that the opposition was not living up to the expectations of the people by not taking up the issue of price rise."

Rather than warning the working class as to the purpose of the BJP's and NDA's posturing over the fuel hike issue, the Stalinists have given it credibility and served notice they are ready to broaden their collaboration with the communal right. CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat cynically justified the Left's stance, saying "the corporate media is amusingly concerned about the ideological purity of the CPM."

Under conditions where the working class, under the ruinous impact of the world economic crisis, is coming into struggle, the Stalinists are working to politically disarm and derail it, engaging in reactionary maneuvers that lend legitimacy to the Hindu supremacist BJP and otherwise subordinate the working class to the Indian bourgeoisie.

Not a moment can be lost in fighting for the political reorientation of the working class through a break with the nationalist, pro-capitalist politics of Stalinism and the building of a new mass revolutionary party of the working class on an international socialist, that is Trotskyist, program.



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