

Stalinists threatened in West Bengal election, after “pro-investor” policies

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In six phases commencing April 18 and concluding May 10, the people of West Bengal, India's fourth most populous state and the political bastion of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), will vote in state assembly elections.

Within the Indian media and elite it is widely anticipated that the vote will result in the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front being swept from office, ending 34 consecutive years of Left Front rule over the east Indian state. Such a result, following on the 2009 national parliamentary elections in which the Left Front lost almost two thirds of its seats in the Lok Sabha (House of the People), would constitute a devastating political blow to the Stalinists and greatly diminish their influence in official politics.

In the 2006 West Bengal state election the Left Front triumphed following a campaign in which it openly solicited and won the support of big business. Since then, its pursuit of self-avowed “pro-investor policies” has brought it into violent conflict with the peasantry and rural poor and increasingly alienated the working class. Moreover, riots over the food distribution system have highlighted pervasive corruption in the CPM-led government

Over the past four years, the Left Front has suffered a series of defeats in *panchayat* (local), municipal and national parliamentary elections in West Bengal, principally at the hands of a virulently right-wing, Bengali split-off from the Congress Party, the Trinamool (Grass Roots) Congress.

Led by arch-demagogue Mamata Banerjee, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) is leading an electoral alliance that includes the Congress Party, India's premier political party and the dominant partner in India's national coalition government.

When seat-sharing negotiations with the Congress reached an impasse last month, Banerjee unilaterally announced TMC candidates for almost four-fifths of the 292 state assembly seats. That the Congress, on the express instructions of party leader Sonia Gandhi, swallowed its pride and accepted Banerjee's dictat underscores that the senior Congress leadership is determined not to miss this “historic opportunity” to unseat the Left Front.

For decades the Stalinists have functioned as part of India's political establishment, subordinating the working class to one right wing bourgeois party after another. It was the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM) that corralled various regional and caste-based parties into the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) following the shock result of the 2004 national election. For four years, from May 2004 through June 2008, the CPM-led Left Front provided the UPA government with its parliamentary majority.

But the Indian bourgeoisie is now anxiously awaiting the Left Front's defeat in West Bengal, calculating that this will provide it

with an opportunity to shift the politics of one of India's most important states and the country as a whole sharply to the right.

The electoral debacle facing the CPM is the outcome of the fulsome support it has given the bourgeoisie during the past two decades in pursuing its drive to transform India into a cheap labor producer for world capitalism. Since Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, a CPM Politburo member, became West Bengal chief minister at the beginning of the last decade, the Left Front government has turned even further right, banning strikes in Information Technology and IT-enabled industries, curtailing social spending, and offering tax concessions to big business.

The government's policy of expropriating prime agricultural land for industrial development provoked mass opposition from the peasantry in 2007-8 in Nandigram and Singur—opposition that the Stalinists sought to suppress through state and goon violence. (See West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre and West Bengal's Stalinist government mounts terror campaign to quash peasant unrest)

The Stalinists have responded to their prospective defeat in the 2011 West Bengal state assembly elections by lurching still further right. Bhattacharjee has cast the elections as a choice between the Left Front and “anarchy,” arguing that the TMC is a menace to bourgeois order and capitalist development because it has opposed the government's pro-investor land appropriations and, in doing so, entered into an unacknowledged political alliance with the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which advocates a peasant-based protracted guerrilla war.

The Left Front government has given its full support to Operation Green Hunt, the massive Indian government-directed counter-insurgency war against the Maoist-led tribal insurgency in parts of eastern India, including several West Bengal districts. Bhattacharjee and other CPM leaders never tire of repeating Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's claim that the Maoist insurgency is India's “greatest internal security threat.”

Their hope had been that they could persuade the Congress Party leadership that the Left Front is a more responsible ally and better defender of bourgeois rule than the TMC, but the Congress leadership spurned the Stalinists' appeals.

It is the right wing politics of the Stalinists that have opened the door for Mamata Banerjee, a largely discredited anti-communist firebrand and frequent ally of the Hindu supremacist BJP, to recast herself as a defender of the peasants of Bengal and other largely impoverished groups like the Muslims

But she has also received a significant boost from various ostensibly “left” petty bourgeois organizations—NGOs, the Socialist Unity Center of India, and most importantly, the Maoists. These forces facilitated

the TMC's ultimately successful attempt to insinuate itself into the leadership of the peasant unrest in Nandigram and Singur, claiming that it was necessary to promote the broadest unity in opposition to the Left Front government. And they have continued to promote Banerjee and her TMC as the only viable alternative to the current pro-investor state government.

In the case of the Maoists, their alliance with the rightwing TMC has been justified by invoking Stalinist stock phrases associated with the greatest betrayals of the world working class: To defeat the "social fascist" Left Front government, argue the Maoists, it is necessary to forge a popular front with the "progressive" bourgeois Mamata Banerjee.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist), which usually urges the boycott of elections, has called on the people of West Bengal to support the TMC and make Mamata Banerjee, who is currently Railway Minister in the UPA government and in an electoral alliance with the Congress Party, the state's chief minister.

Over the past four years Banerjee has been careful to maintain her "left" guise, making selective criticisms of the government in which she serves as a cabinet minister on issues that particularly impact on workers and toilers. So for example, she has criticized government-ordered oil price hikes and on occasion posed as an opponent of privatization, although in her capacity as Railway Minister she has in fact been spearheading it.

Banerjee has coupled her hypocritical populist pronouncements with repeated calls on the central government to impose "president's rule" on West Bengal so as to remove the Left Front government. The Congress Party refused this anti-democratic and patently anti-constitutional demand. However in a clear sign that it was putting the Left Front regime on notice, it appointed K.S. Narayanan, the outgoing National Security Advisor and a former Intelligence Bureau chief, as the state's governor in January 2010. Under India's constitution, the governor is armed with sweeping emergency powers.

With the elections now approaching and her hands coming closer to the reins of power, Banerjee is beginning to reveal the vicious anti-working class agenda that she will pursue if she becomes chief minister.

Last month she recruited Amit Mitra, who for the past 15 years has served as the general secretary of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries, one of India's most important corporate lobby groups, as a star TMC candidate. From all reports, Mitra will be finance minister in a TMC-led government.

After being introduced to reporters as a TMC candidate, Mitra quickly rebuffed the CPM's claims that Banerjee is "anti-industry," i.e. anti-big business. "I have worked very closely with Banerjee," said Mitra. "She is the first person who brought about the PPP (Public Private Partnership) model in the Indian Railways. There are 33 projects running under PPP model at present. That is historic in itself."

Declaring the state government to be in a fiscal black hole, Mitra claimed Banerjee would be able to quickly reverse the situation by introducing policies that will attract investment. In other words, she will resolve the budget crisis by following the same course as the current Left Front government only more quickly and brutally.

"The state's bankruptcy can be turned around within a reasonable period of time under Mamata Banerjee's leadership through massive confidence building measures among all sections of society," claimed Mitra. "There will be a tectonic shift in the flow of investments and expansion of existing industrial units once the party comes to power in

the state."

Banerjee's association with reaction and repression goes back to the beginning of her political career. She emerged as a Congress Party student leader in the 1970s when the Congress was associated at the all-India level with the imposition of the Emergency and in West Bengal with state-landlord violence against the working class and peasantry.

Should she become the Chief Minister she will unleash a massive attack on the working class and toilers in the name of fighting CPM corruption and goon violence and putting order in the finances of the state.

Only the politically stupid or criminal can put any stock in her alliance with the Maoists. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously noted, while she has frequently made sympathetic statements about the Maoists, she has also on occasion declared the CPM and the Maoists to be "brothers" and indistinguishable from one another. Banerjee's anti-CPM credentials are impeccable. By making an amalgam of them with the Maoists, she is signaling Indian big business and her allies in the Congress Party that once she has wrested the West Bengal government from the CPM-led Left Front, using the Maoists to provide her with "left" camouflage, she can be counted on to deal—bloodily—with her erstwhile allies.

The developments in West Bengal underline the impasse into which both wings of Stalinism—the parliamentary CPM and the Maoists—have brought the working class. The former has worked hand in glove with the bourgeoisie in implementing its neo-liberal agenda and thus created conditions in which a right-winger like Banerjee can posture as a friend of the oppressed; the latter have been busily fashioning this capitalist wolf with its proverbial sheepskin.

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