

Indian Stalinists and the anti-corruption Lokpal movement

Sarath Kumara, Peter Symonds
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Indian politics has been dominated for weeks by the anti-corruption campaign waged by Anna Hazare for a Jan Lokpal bill to establish an ombudsman. The response of the Stalinists of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) at every turn has again demonstrated their complete integration into the Indian political establishment as staunch defenders of bourgeois rule.

The general line of the CPM emerged early on. Against Hazare's emerging anti-corruption protests, the CPM upheld the "supremacy of parliament." At the time of Hazare's first fast in April, an editorial in its *People's Democracy* entitled "Contempt for Democracy Not Allowed" criticised Hazare's failure to stand for parliament and his dismissive attitude to voters, and wrote in glowing terms of "secular, democratic India".

There are of course real dangers facing the working class from Hazare's movement. It rests on sections of the middle class which have significantly expanded after two decades of pro-market reform. Their hostility to "corruption" and support for "a strong Lokpal" stems from frustration that their ambitions for enrichment are being impeded by government and the state bureaucracy.

The CPM's overriding concern, however, has been to uphold the parliamentary system on which the Indian bourgeoisie has rested since 1947 against any extra-parliamentary challenge. For the CPM, there is no higher principle than the Indian constitution, which it falsely declares embodies "the sovereignty of the people". "To treat this with disdain and contempt engenders the dangers of undermining this constitutional order itself. This cannot be allowed," the editorial declared.

However, as Hazare's campaign began to gather pace, the CPM quickly jumped on the anti-corruption bandwagon, lending legitimacy to this right-wing populist movement. Big business and the establishment media fanned the Hazare protests as a useful diversion from corporate involvement in the various recent corruption scandals and to intensify pressure on

the Congress-led government to accelerate its pro-market reforms amid growing global economic uncertainty.

In July, the CPM announced its own anti-corruption campaign for "a strong and independent Lokpal". Its pamphlet declared that corruption was "ruining the moral fabric of our society", leading to "legitimate widespread national outrage". Giving its own "left" twist to this moral crusade, the CPM continued: "We have to understand, expose and fight back [against] the fountainhead of corruption in India today ... the neo-liberal Trimurti [three Hindu gods] ... representing the nexus of big business, politicians and bureaucrats."

The CPM's campaign against "neo-liberalism" is as phony as it is cynical. The root cause of "corruption" is not the so-called neo-liberal policies of the past two decades, but the profit system itself. The nexus between big business, government and the state apparatus is fundamental to capitalism. The government and state do not serve "the people", but the interests of the bourgeoisie—a relationship that is obscured under parliamentary rule. "Corrupt" payments to grease the wheels of government are an everyday occurrence not only in India, but in every country.

While it now proclaims that the government has become "a symbol of corruption", the CPM gave its crucial support to the ruling Congress-led coalition, and its "neo-liberal" policies, when it came to power after the 2004 election. The CPM played a critical role in suppressing opposition in the working class to government policies, and was dispensed with when Congress no longer needed its parliamentary numbers after the 2009 election.

Moreover, the CPM itself has been directly responsible for implementing pro-market reforms—neo-liberalism—in the Indian states where it has held power, West Bengal and Kerala. Such was the popular disgust and anger in West Bengal that the CPM-led Left Front coalition after 34 years in power lost in a landslide at the state election in May to the right-wing Trinamool Congress. While in office, the CPM ruthlessly pursued an agenda of turning the state into a cheap labour

platform for foreign investors—expropriating peasant land, shutting down public enterprises, offering tax concessions to business and outlawing strikes in IT and IT-related industries.

The Lokpal protests came to a head last month after Hazare announced that he would begin a second fast to demand that his Jan Lokpal legislation be passed by parliament. In response, the government sought to suppress the movement, arresting Hazare and his supporters on August 16 on the pretext that they had not abided by the rules for using Ramlila Maidan, a public ground in New Delhi. The move backfired badly provoking further protests and condemnation in the media and by opposition parties.

The CPM quickly joined the chorus. While condemning the government's anti-democratic methods, the party made no criticism of Hazare or those leaping to his defence such as the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). On August 23, the CPM joined with fellow Stalinists from the Communist Party of India (CPI) and various bourgeois, regionally-based parties such as the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagan, a Tamil communal party based in Tamil Nadu, to protest against the arrests and to demand "effective measures against corruption, including a strong Lokpal".

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh backed down and allowed Hazare to proceed with his fast. As the protest wore on, however, growing concerns emerged in ruling circles about the standoff between the government and Hazare. Not only was the issue of "corruption" holding up the agenda of pro-market restructuring, but the protests threatened to encourage other layers of society—particularly the working class—to take matters into their own hands to defend jobs and living standards.

Desperate efforts were made to defuse the crisis. Not wanting to be seen to cave in, the government proclaimed the "supremacy of parliament" and refused to pass the Jan Lokpal legislation. Once again, the CPM, responding to the needs of the bourgeoisie, emerged as strident defenders of the rule of parliament. CPM parliamentarian Sitaram Yechury declared: "There is a constitutional scheme of things; a legislative process that cannot be abandoned" and called on Hazare to accept it.

The government called a joint party meeting on August 24, which issued a statement—supported by all parties including the CPM and CPI—praising Hazare, but calling for him to end his fast and to abide by the legislative process. Behind the scenes, frantic negotiations continued with Team Anna to reach a compromise to end Hazare's fast. Congress agreed to reconvene parliament last Friday to adopt a "Sense of the House" resolution that included Hazare's three main demands for inclusion in any Lokpal legislation.

Finally on Saturday, both parliamentary houses adopted the resolution—unanimously—and Hazare ended his fast on Sunday. The Indian media hailed the resolution as a sign of a new era of cooperation between the government and opposition. Joining in this spirit of "non-partisanship", the CPM and CPI also voted for Hazare's demands—the establishment of state Lokpals, the inclusion of the lower state bureaucracy within the legislation's ambit, and a "citizens' charter" for all government departments with penalties for under-performance and corruption.

In supporting a "strong Lokpal", the CPM has sanctioned the establishment of a new bureaucratic apparatus at all levels of government with extensive police powers to investigate and prosecute, with little or no parliamentary oversight. Inevitably, these new bodies, far from acting in the interests of working people, will be used to further undermine the democratic rights of the working class—all in the name of fighting corruption.

Whatever hesitation it might have initially expressed, the CPM joined in the general adulation of Hazare. Polit Bureau member Brinda Karat congratulated Hazare, declaring: "We are happy that Anna's fast is over but for the Left, the struggle is far from over, as the fountainhead of corruption lies in the corporate-bureaucrat-politician nexus which is embedded in the framework of neoliberal policies of the government." Fighting corruption, she declared, was the main issue facing the nation.

In reality, Hazare's anti-corruption movement has served as a convenient diversion from deepening class tensions as the Indian economy slows and anger mounts in the working class over job destruction, poverty and the deepening divide between rich and poor. The pressing issue facing the vast majority of Indians is how to survive from day to day on less than \$US2 a day.

The very fact that Hazare can drum up a right-wing, anti-corruption movement based on more affluent sections of the middle class is a product of the CPM's decades of betrayals that have suppressed any independent political movement of the working class. Workers need to draw the necessary lessons from this latest evidence of the CPM's bankrupt perspective of class collaboration and parliamentary cretinism and turn to the program of socialist internationalism fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.



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