India: Stalinist CPM promotes alliance with regional bourgeois parties

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7 April 2012

India's main Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, started its 20th national congress on Wednesday, April 4. The congress, which is being held in Kozhikode, a port city in the southwest Indian state of Kerala, will conclude Monday, April 9.

In its deliberations so far, the congress has reaffirmed the key policies carried out by the CPM in recent years. These include propping up the right-wing Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government from May 2004 through June 2008 and implementing "pro-investor" policies in West Bengal, where the CPM-led Left Front formed the government until its defeat in elections last year.

Under conditions where there is mounting opposition from the working class and rural poor to rising prices, economic insecurity, crumbling public services, and ever-widening social inequality, the CPM congress is calling for the building of a "Left and democratic alternative" to the UPA and a rival electoral bloc, the National Democratic Alliance led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This "alternative" would be comprised of the CPM-led Left Front and various reactionary regionalist and caste-ist parties.

The CPM is eschewing the term "Third Front," which it used at the time of the 2009 national election. But the difference is largely semantic.

In reply to a question during a press briefing on April 5, CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat said, "We don't use the word 'third front.' Third front is a frontal organization for electoral purposes. Left democratic alternative is our third alternative. For elections and day-to-day issues, we could come to some understanding [with the regional bourgeois parties]."

An April 5 CPM press release, touted "a Left and democratic front" as "the only alternative to the current bourgeois-landlord order." But then spelled out the CPM's intention to work in tandem with parties that it labels "bourgeois" and which are totally committed to sustaining the "bourgeois-landlord" order. "The Party," declared the press release, "will cooperate with the secular opposition parties and regional parties on people's issues, in defence of federalism and secularism."

For the 2009 national elections, the CPM and its Left Front cobbled together a "third front" comprised of rightwing regional parties, like the Tamil Nadu-based AIADMK and the BJD of Orissa, which previously had been aligned with the Congress Party or BJP or alternately with one then the other. The front not only proved to be an electoral non-starter. Its ramshackle character and the cynical manner with which it was put together discredited the Stalinists' "Third Front" concept.

Several of the Stalinists' ostensible Third Front allies made clear that they would quit the front on the morrow, if they got a better offer from one or the other of the rival electoral coalition. As for the Stalinists, they showed that a party only had to quit the BJP-led NDA for them to enlist it in their roll-call of "secular and democratic forces."

In the aftermath of the UPA government's re-election, the Stalinists shelved talk of a Third Front. But they have continued to form all manner of rightwing electoral alliances. This included assisting the AIADMK, a party that when last in office used mass arrests and mass firings to break a government workers' strike and repeatedly used draconian anti-terrorism laws to persecute political opponents, to

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return to power in the 2011Tamil Nadu state elections. And while denouncing the Congress Party for pursuing "neo-liberal" policies, the CPM has continued to urge workers to direct their energies toward pressing the UPA government to pursue "pro-people" policies.

In his opening speech to the CPM congress, Karat said, "The recent political developments showed the failure of the two combinations—the UPA and the NDA—to consolidate and grow… As more and more, the bankruptcy and venality of the present order becomes apparent, the people are looking for an alternative."

Arguing that "such an alternative can be provided only by the Left and democratic forces," he said: "In order to build the Left and democratic alliance and forge such an alternative, it is necessary first of all to strengthen the CPM, expand its base and influence all over the country. A strong CPM can strengthen Left unity and thereby rally other democratic forces to present a Left and democratic platform."

If Karat is emphasizing the building of the CPM as the key to cobbling together a bourgeois governmental alternative to the rival Congress and BJP-led coalitions, it is because the Stalinists fear their marginalization within the politics of Indian bourgeois elite after losing almost two-thirds of their seats in the national parliament in 2009 and falling from power in West Bengal and Kerala last year.

In a speech to Wednesday's inaugural session of the CPM, senior party leader S. Ramachandran Pillai lamented, "The corporate media and the political pundits of the ruling classes are making the false propaganda that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Left have lost their importance and relevance in Indian politics."

The Stalinists calculate that by demonstrating their ability to channel the growing popular opposition to the government and the bitter fruits of two decades of economic "reforms" into politically safe channels, as with the February 28 national protest strike, that they can prove to the bourgeoisie their continuing importance as the "left" guardians of bourgeois rule.

The CPM's Left Front ally and fellow Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India, has welcomed the CPM's emphasis on building a bourgeois anti-Congress, anti-BJP alliance. Addressing the inaugural session of the CPM congress, the outgoing CPI general-secretary, A.B. Bhardan, said that the regional bourgeois parties sometimes succumb to "opportunism," but "they have joined hands with the Left on many issues. We have been together against anti-peoples policies of the central government. Despite occasional opportunisms, they have secular values." Further emphasizing the need to join hands with these right-wing parties, Bardhan declared, "There is a political vacuum, that can't be filled solely by the left."

The CPM claims to be the foremost fighter against neo-liberal or pro-market big business policies. This is a bare-faced lie. Not only has the CPM repeatedly propped up Indian governments that have pressed forward with deregulation, privatization, tax cuts for big business, and social spending cuts, including propping up the current Congress-led UPA government for four years. Whenever and wherever they have led the state government over the last two decades, they have implemented like policies

Significantly, when challenged on this point by this writer, the CPM General-Secretary proved unable to reply.

At the end of Karat's April 5 press conference, I asked him: "How do you explain the difference between the neo-liberal economic policies carried out by UPA government and the pro-investor economic policies carried out by the former Left Front government in West Bengal?" Karat dodged the question. "It is a long discussion. It will need at least half an hour," he declared, then promptly left the hall.

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