

All-India general strike against pro-investor “big bang” economic “reforms”

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Tens of millions of workers, independent truck drivers, small shop-owners and others will join a one-day all-India *hartal* (general shutdown of schools, shops and workplaces) today that has been called by the parliamentary opposition to protest against fuel price hikes, the opening of the country’s retail sector to foreign multi-brand mega-stores like Wal-Mart, and other pro-investor “reforms.”

Under intense pressure from domestic and foreign big business, the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government announced late last week what it has termed “big bang” economic reforms. With the ostensible aim of spurring economic growth, the government is aiming to reduce the state budget deficit at the expense of working people and spur the reorganization of key economic sectors so as to make them more profitable for big business.

On Sept. 13, the government raised diesel prices by 14 percent and limited the number of liquefied natural gas cooking cylinders a family can buy at subsidised prices to just six per year. These measures will squeeze living standards that have already been pinched by several years of double-digit or near double-digit inflation in a country where three-quarters of the population ekes out a living on \$2 per day or less.

The next day, the government gave the green light to foreign investors to take 51 percent ownership of multi-brand retailers and 49 percent ownership of domestic air carriers, raised the limit on foreign ownership of domestic broadcasters to 74 percent, and announced a further sell-off of the government’s stake in several large public enterprises.

The past two years have seen a wave of militant strikes and plant occupations, including at companies like Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, BYD Electronics, and Foxconn. Less than seven months ago, on February 28, about a hundred million Indian workers participated in a countrywide general strike in opposition to the UPA government’s socio-economic policies. The drive of the central and state governments to dispossess peasants for Special Economic Zones and other big business development projects has also provoked widespread opposition.

But the opposition parties that have called today’s *hartal*—the Stalinist-led Left Front, various regional and caste-based bourgeois parties, and the Official Opposition Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and its allies—have done so with the aim of politically smothering the working class and preventing the emergence of a genuine challenge to the bourgeoisie’s two-decade old drive to make India a haven for investors and a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism.

All the opposition parties, including the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—have implemented the bourgeoisie’s economic “reform” agenda.

By calling today’s protest, the opposition parties are hoping to place themselves in a position to electorally exploit the mass anger against the government, while diverting it into channels inoffensive to the Indian bourgeoisie.

So socially explosive are the government’s “big bang” reforms that even several of the Congress Party’s UPA partners are claiming to oppose them. The West Bengal-based Trinamul Congress has threatened to pull out of the government on Friday, thereby jeopardising the UPA’s parliamentary majority, if the diesel price hike is not reduced, the cap on subsidized cooking fuel raised substantially, and the decision to allow Wal-Mart and other giant multi-brand retailers into India rescinded. Another UPA member, the Tamil Nadu-based DMK, says it supports today’s strike but is not thinking of leaving the government.

The Stalinist parties have for decades formed one reactionary alliance after another with the Congress Party, a long list of regional and caste-ist bourgeois parties, and even on occasion, the Hindu Supremacist BJP. They issued their call for today’s *hartal* jointly with a series of erstwhile BJP and Congress allies, including the Samajwadi Party (SP), Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and Janata Dal (Secular).

In an attempt to justify their collaboration with these right-wing parties, a CPM leader told the *Kolkata Telegraph*, “We know that none of these parties can be trusted for a long-term association. They can change colours and go with the BJP or the Congress. But if they are coming with us on issues we want to raise, then why not use them?”

The BJP and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) have issued a separate call for today’s *hartal*. When pressed, the Stalinists will claim that they are in no way coordinating their protest with that of the BJP, a notorious right-wing party that pressed forward with privatization, deregulation and other pro-market policies when it led India’s government between 1998 and 2004. “What can we do if they choose the same date?” lamented one CPM leader.

But the Stalinists are mounting no serious effort to demarcate the two protests, have in BJP-like terms called on “all patriotic-minded citizens” to “unite” against the government’s “big bang” measures, and previously announced their willingness to work with the BJP in parliament to defeat “neo-liberal” policies.

Moreover, the Stalinists have responded to the growth of worker resistance by forging an alliance with the trade union affiliates of the BJP and the Congress Party. The CPM-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the CPI-affiliated All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) have repeatedly hailed their alliance with the BJP’s Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh and the Congress’ Indian National Trade Union Congress, claiming it constitutes an “historic” blow for working class unity.

In reality, whenever there have been militant working class struggles, as at Maruti-Suzuki or the *Neyveli Lignite Corporation*, the CITU and AITUC have joined with the other union federations in isolating them, thereby allowing the state to use the police and courts to victimize the workers with impunity.

During the past two decades, the Stalinists have provided pivotal support for the bourgeoisie, both in implementing its “reform” agenda and in derailing the mounting opposition from the working class and rural toilers.

Dismissing socialism as “a far off cry,” the Stalinists propped up the Congress minority government of Narasimha Rao, which—with the current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh then serving as finance minister—launched the bourgeoisie’s “new economic policy” in 1991. From 2004 to 2008, the Stalinist-led Left Front provided the Congress-led UPA with its parliamentary majority, while promoting the claim that it is possible to have “reform with a human face.”

Stalinist-led governments in West Bengal and Kerala

ruthlessly pursued what they themselves termed “pro-investor” economic policies until they were swept from power in state elections last year. In West Bengal the CPM-led government banned strikes in the IT sector and deployed the police and party goons to brutally attack peasants who rebelled against the state appropriation of their lands for big business.

The CPM and CPI union federations have, on an annual basis, routinely mounted one-day nationwide general strikes for the past decade, so as to contain mounting working class resistance and tie it to the reactionary perspective of pressuring the central Indian government, whether led by the BJP or Congress, to pursue “pro-people” policies.

Even the Stalinists themselves have been forced to admit that these protests have, to use the words of an article in the September 9 issue of the CPM’s English weekly *People’s Democracy*, been greeted by successive governments with “contemptuous neglect.”

Insofar as the opposition of the Stalinists and the other opposition parties to the Congress’ “big bang” measures is not simply an electoral feint, it is based on Indian nationalism, that is, on defending the interests of sections of India’s national bourgeoisie who feel threatened by the entry of foreign capital.

Under conditions of the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression, the working class in India, like its class brothers and sisters around the world, is being thrust into struggle—a struggle that poses the need for the working class to advance a socialist program to reorganize society so the economy can be run to meet human needs and not enrich the few.

The working class must rally the poor peasants and other oppressed sections of society under its leadership in a struggle against big business, the landowners and moneylenders and their political representatives. What is most crucial is the building of a mass revolutionary party based upon the program and perspective of international socialism to prosecute the struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish a workers and peasants government—an Indian section of the Fourth International, the world revolutionary party founded by Leon Trotsky.



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