Indian Stalinists promote fraud of “secular,” “pro-people” Third Front

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With voting set to begin in India’s nine-phase general election, India’s twin Stalinist parliamentary parties—the CPM [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] and the CPI [Communist Party of India]—are redoubling their efforts to create a Third Front comprised of various right-wing regional and caste-based parties.

“We are open to anyone who is non-Congress and non-BJP,” declared CPM Politburo Member Sitaram Yechury last week. Yechury then identified as potential allies the leaders of three parties—the AIADMK, JD (U), and BJD—all of which have previously partnered with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and now head right-wing state governments.

The Stalinists’ prospective coalition partners have largely spurned their overtures. They are positioning themselves for post-election bargaining with the Congress Party—the dominant partner in India’s current United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government—and/or the BJP, the presumptive election front-runner.

The CPM and CPI are, nonetheless, insisting that a Third Front will emerge after the election results are tabulated in mid-May, and that it can and will provide a “secular,” “democratic,” “pro-people” governmental alternative to the rival Congress and BJP-led electoral alliances.

This is a shameless fraud: the Stalinists’ would-be allies make, indeed are based on, reactionary ethno-linguistic, communal and casteist appeals. All—and the same must be said of the Stalinists—have implemented socially incendiary “pro-market” and “pro-investor” policies that have resulted in further impoverishment and economic insecurity in a country where three-quarters of the population struggles to survive on less than $2 per day.

For decades, the CPI and CPM have served as vital props of capitalist rule, systematically subordinating the working class to the Congress and other bourgeois parties in the name of opposing “feudal-imperialist reaction” and more recently the communalist BJP.

The Indian bourgeoisie’s traditional party of government, the Congress Party has spearheaded its drive to transform India into a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism and done so with the Stalinists’ support. In the early 1990s the CPM and its Left Front propped up the Congress government of Narasimha Rao that implemented the Indian bourgeoisie’s pivot from state-led development to privatization, deregulation, marketization and full integration into the US-led world capitalist order.

And after the 2004 elections it was the CPM that corralled various regional parties into the Congress-led UPA. This included helping write the UPA’s ostensible “Common Minimum Programme,” which touted the lie that it is possible to reconcile neo-liberal restructuring with the needs of India’s “workers and toilers”—i.e. to have “reform with a human face.” For the next four years, the Stalinists provided the UPA with its parliamentary majority, voting to sustain it in office even as they conceded it was implementing a pro-big business socio-economic program and a pro-US foreign policy little different from that of the previous BJP-led government.

Ultimately, in July 2008, the Congress decided to effectively kick the Stalinists out of the government so that it could push through the Indo-US nuclear accord and thereby cement a “global strategic partnership” between the India bourgeoisie and US imperialism.

The Stalinists’ Third Front maneuver is aimed at politically suppressing the working class under conditions where the world economic crisis has pulled the legs out from under Indian capitalism’s “rise” and the class struggle is rapidly intensifying.

The decade-old Congress-led UPA government is popularly identified with soaring food prices, mounting unemployment and the gifting of public assets to big business.

Corporate India, meanwhile, has largely swung behind the BJP, now led by the Gujarat Chief Minister and self-styled “Hindu strongman” Narendra Modi, with the expectation that he will push through a raft of reactionary “pro-market” measures in the face of mass opposition. These include: the dismantling of energy and other price subsidies; the gutting of restrictions on layoffs and factory closures; the imposition of a national goods and services tax; wholesale privatization and the dismantling of most remaining limits on foreign investment.

With their promotion of a “non-BJP,” “non-Congress” parliamentary bloc comprised of the Indian bourgeoisie’s smaller, regional parties the Stalinists are seeking to politically smother the working class and under conditions where the bourgeoisie, as attested by its enthusiasm for Modi, is

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embracing reaction and turning to authoritarian forms of rule. The Stalinists' prospective allies are as devoted servants of big business as the two "national parties" and will in an instant ally with the Congress or BJP if they calculate it will further the mercenary interests of their respective regionally-based faction of the bourgeoisie.

On February 25, CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat announced that leaders of eleven parties—the four constituents of the Left Front and seven regional parties—had met and agreed to form "an alternative to the Congress and the BJP." Karat further claimed that this alternative is committed to a "pro-people development path." But the brief statement signed by the eleven parties said not a word about what this agenda is to consist of apart from a promise—which could easily have come from a Congress of BJP manifesto—to "address the concerns of inequality, social justice, farmers' interests, minorities and women's rights."

Within hours of Prakash's announcement, the "alternative" began to unravel. First, the head of the Assam Gana Parishad said his party did not rule out joining a BJP-led government. Then, another signatory, the Samajwadi Party (SP) indicated it would support another Congress-led government to keep the BJP from power. In fact the SP, the ruling party in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, has repeatedly bailed out the Congress-led government over the past six years—most famously in the July 2008 vote over the Indo-US nuclear accord.

Odisha Chief Minister and BJD head Naveen Patnaik skipped the Feb. 25 meeting, although his party was announced as a supporter of the CPM-Left Front initiated "alternative." Soon after, to the Stalinists' dismay, Patnaik announced that his party would contest the national and Odisha state elections, which are being held simultaneously, alone. In 2009, Patnaik's BJD formed an electoral bloc with the CPM and CPI almost immediately after he broke an eleven-year partnership with the BJP due to a seat-sharing squabble.

An even bigger blow to the Stalinists was the announcement by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and AIADMK supremo Jayalalithaa that her party would not make a seat-sharing adjustment with the CPI and CPM. The Stalinists had been promoting Jayalalithaa as a possible Third Front prime minister—no matter that she is a notorious right-winger, who in 2003 used mass jailings and firings to break a state employees' strike, has repeatedly given support to the Hindu communalist campaigns of the BJP and its allies, and terms Modi a personal friend. Clearly hoping to patch things up with Jayalalithaa and her AIADMK, the CPM waited some two weeks before issuing a statement demanding she clarify if she is preparing to make a post-poll deal with the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance.

The unravelling of its Third Front notwithstanding, the Stalinists are clutching to this empty shell, now insisting that it will take shape after the elections and continuing to boost the "progressive" potential of the AIADMK and BJD, etc. even as these parties are visibly preparing to enter into a BJP- or Congress-led government.

"What we announced on February 25," CPM head Karat, "told the *Hindu* last weekend, "is our joint intention to be together against the Congress and the BJP, and after the elections, we will give shape to that alternative."

To underline the CPM's readiness to move still further right to accommodate its potential coalition partners, Karat told the *Hindu* that the CPM would be ready itself to enter into a Third Front government. In 1996, the CPM midwifed a "United Front" government based on various regional parties, but declined to enter the government even though Jyoti Basu, the CPM Chief Minister of West Bengal, was offered the post of prime minister. With the CPM's support from outside, the short-lived United Front government pursued the Indian bourgeoisie's neo-liberal reform agenda, helping pave the way for the BJP and its NDA to win the subsequent election.

While pushing their Third Front fraud, the Stalinists and their junior partners in the CPM-led Left Front are themselves sending out signals that they are prepared to once again prop up a Congress-led government.

CPM Politburo Member and former West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee said late last month that it cannot be excluded and the Left Front will support a Congress-led government, but "only if a situation like 2004 arises … when we had to side with Congress in order to stop the communal BJP."

The CPI, for its part, has formed an electoral alliance with the Congress Party for the assembly and Lok Sabha (national parliamentary) elections in Telangana, a region of Andhra Pradesh that is soon to become a separate state, claiming that this is a "special case."

The Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) bolted the CPM-led Left Democratic Front in Kerala last month to join the Congress's United Democratic Front. The Congress made the RSP's entry into the Kerala state government conditional on it agreeing to support a Congress-bid to retain power following the national election. Nevertheless, the RSP remains a member of the Stalinists' Left Front nationally, as well as their ostensibly anti-Congress "democratic and secular alternative."

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