

Stalinists suffer debacle in Indian elections

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India's two Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the smaller, older Communist Party of India, suffered a humiliating debacle in India's recent general election—a debacle akin to that suffered by their erstwhile ally, the big business Congress Party.

The Stalinist-led Left Front lost more than half of its seats and saw its share of the popular vote fall sharply for the second consecutive national election.

Whereas in 2004 the Left Front captured more than 60 seats and a 7.7 percent share of the popular vote, a decade later it took just 12 seats and a 4.5 percent share of the popular vote.

The Communist Party of India (CPI), which has been represented in every Indian parliament since 1952, now has a lone seat in the Lok Sabha, the popularly-elected lower house of India's parliament. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM has only 9 Lok Sabha seats—not enough to retain its status as one of six nationally recognized parties.

Of the Left Front's dozen remaining Lok Sabha MPs, eight come from Kerala, two from Tripura, a tiny, overwhelmingly rural state, and the final two from West Bengal. India's fourth most populous state, West Bengal was ruled by a CPM-led Left Front government for 34 consecutive years ending in 2011. In the 2009 national election, the CPM succeeded in electing nine MPs from West Bengal and the Left Front as a whole 15.

Both the CPM and CPI have suffered a precipitous decline in their popular vote even as compared with 2009. The CPM's vote fell from 5.33 in the 2009 election to 3.2 percent in 2014, while that of the CPI plummeted from 1.43 to 0.8 percent.

Visibly shaken by their shattering defeat at the polls, the Stalinists have had next to nothing to say in the week since the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) was swept into office buoyed by the mass opposition to the right-wing Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance.

And the little that they have said has been directed at covering up their own political responsibility for paving the BJP's road to power.

The last posting on the CPI's official website dates from May 15, the day before the votes from India's nine-phase election were tallied.

The CPM, for its part, published a terse press release after a meeting of its Politburo last Sunday. It said that the CPM leadership had conducted “a preliminary review of the election,” including an examination of “the various factors which led to the poor results for the Party and the Left,” but gave not even a hint as to the substance of their discussion.

CPM General-Secretary Prakash Karat and the CPM English-language weekly *People's Democracy* have been somewhat more forthcoming.

They have made the obvious point that the BJP gained from the mass anger with the Congress government over sky-rocketing food prices, mass joblessness, endemic poverty and widespread corruption. The “people's discontent,” declared *People's Democracy*, “was successfully exploited by the BJP.” According to Karat, the BJP was the beneficiary of a mass “negative vote” against the Congress.

But this only begs the question: why were the Stalinists unable to appeal to the popular anger with the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government?

So as to avoid this embarrassing question, the CPM is throwing up all

manner of banalities, side issues and ruses. The corporate media vigorously promoted the BJP, complains *People's Democracy*. The Trinamul Congress—the right-wing party that was able to come to power in West Bengal in 2011 by exploiting popular anger with the “pro-investor” policies pursued by the CPM-led Left Front—engaged in widespread ballot-rigging, charges Karat. The Congress, laments *People's Democracy*, mounted “an ineffective campaign” and “failed to enthuse its own cadre and following.”

The truth is the Stalinists are rightly viewed by India's workers and toilers as a party of the corrupt, pro-big business political establishment, not a revolutionary opposition to it. Over the past quarter century they have propped up a series of right-wing governments that have implemented the Indian bourgeoisie's program to make India a hub of cheap labour production for world capitalism—governments that have slashed social spending, privatized infrastructure, offered massive tax and land concessions to big business, set up Special Economic Zones, and otherwise attacked working people.

In those states where the Left Front has itself formed the government—West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura—it has pursued like policies, policies that it frankly terms “pro-investor.” These include banning strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries and using police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to the expropriation of their lands for big business projects.

Moreover, the Stalinists have used what residual influence they retain over the working class through their trade union affiliates and the Left Front to suppress any working-class challenge to the sweatshop conditions that prevail in India's new globally connected industries, isolating militant strikes against Maruti Suzuki in Congress-ruled Haryana and at Hyundai, Foxconn, and BYD in Tamil Nadu.

The Stalinists supported the minority Congress government of Narasimha Rao that between 1991 and 1996 carried through a major strategic turn in the policy of the Indian bourgeoisie, abandoning state-led economic growth in favor of full integration in the imperialist-dominated world capitalist economy.

The CPM-led Left Front's role in propping up the Congress-led UPA was even more conspicuous. In 2004, the Left had its best-ever electoral showing and the Stalinists promptly put their enlarged parliamentary delegation at the service of the Congress Party and the ruling class.

The Stalinists played a pivotal role in corraling a series of smaller parties that postured as opponents of the BJP and Congress into the Congress-dominated UPA and then ghost-wrote much of the UPA's Common Minimum Program (CMP). The ostensible program of the UPA during its first term in office, the CMP, with the Stalinists' blessing, promoted the reactionary lie that it would be possible to pursue “reform with a human face”—that is to reconcile the needs of India's workers and toilers with the bourgeoisie's drive to make India a magnet for foreign capital.

The Congress was anxious to reward the Stalinists with cabinet berths in the UPA government. But the CPM declined, calculating it could better keep the working class in check if it maintained a guise of independence. Nonetheless, as a pledge of its commitment to sustaining the Congress in

power and assuming responsibility for the UPA's actions, the CPM agreed that one of its leaders, Somnath Chatterjee, would become the Speaker of the Lok Sabha—a position traditionally reserved for a member of the government.

For the next four years, the Stalinists were the most important ally of the Congress; because they were far and away the largest parliamentary party allied with its UPA, but even more crucially because they were the only one with a base in the working class and credentials, however false and betrayed, as a party of the left.

Although the Stalinists conceded that the UPA was carrying out big business and pro-US policies little different from those of the BJP-led government that preceded it, they continued to prop up the government, claiming it was a bulwark against the Hindu communalist BJP and could be pressured into carrying out “pro-people” policies.

At the CPM's triennial congress in the spring of 2008, it reiterated its intention to sustain the Congress-led UPA in power at least until the next election in 2009. But soon thereafter the Congress effectively kicked the Stalinists out of the UPA, adopting the Indo-US nuclear accord and sealing a “global strategic partnership” with Washington.

The Stalinists at this point made a show of opposing US imperialism. But their opposition had nothing to do with a genuine anti-imperialist policy, based on the independent interests of the Indian and international working class. Rather it was from the standpoint of an alternate strategy for defending the national interests of the Indian bourgeoisie—one based on championing a “multi-polar” world capitalist order and maneuvering with the great powers, including the US, Japan and major European imperialist powers. Thus the Stalinists had previously joined with India's then BJP-led government in 2001 in supporting the US invasion of Afghanistan.

After being kicked out of the UPA, the Stalinists reverted to promoting an ostensibly “anti-BJP, anti-Congress” Third Front comprised of various rightwing regional and caste-based parties that had previously been allied with the Congress, the BJP or in some instances both.

In the 2009 elections, they aligned with such rightwing parties as the Tamil Nadu-based AIADMK and the Odisha-based BJD, hailing these retrograde parties as a “secular,” “progressive” alternative to the Indian bourgeoisie's two main national parties.

A party only had to announce it was withdrawing from the NDA, for the Stalinists to trumpet it as a defender of “secularism,” as exemplified by their rush to ally with the JD (U), long the second biggest partner in the BJP-led NDA, as soon as it announced in 2013 that it was ending its 17-year partnership with the BJP.

Even after the Stalinists' prospective Third Front allies all spurned them in the run-up to the 2014 election, so they could keep their hands free for an anticipated round of post-election horse-trading with the Congress and BJP, the Stalinists continued to insist that after the election they would find a place in a Left-supported Third Front.

Rejecting the Trotskyist program of Permanent Revolution, the Stalinist CPI and CPM have throughout their history systematically subordinated the working class to the Indian bourgeoisie, with devastating consequences for India's workers and toilers. In the pre-1991 period they justified this with the claim that socialism was not yet on the historical agenda in India; workers they claimed must support the “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie in opposing feudal reaction and imperialism.

No matter that the entire history of the 20th century—including the 1917 Russia Revolution and the Congress' suppression of the anti-imperialist upsurge in South Asia and connivance in the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India—had demonstrated that in the contemporary epoch the bourgeoisie in countries of belated development are incapable of completing the basis tasks of the democratic revolution. These tasks, such as liberation for imperialist oppression, national unification, and the eradication of landlordism and casteism, can

and will only be accomplished through a working-class led socialist revolution.

When struggles of an incipient revolutionary character erupted in India in the early 1970s as part of worldwide offensive of the working class, the Stalinists once sought to corral them behind the bourgeoisie. The CPI entered into a coalition government with the Congress Party and supported Indira Gandhi's two-year emergency, under which basic civil liberties were suspended and tens of thousands of workers and leftists jailed. The CPM, meanwhile, tied the working class to the bourgeois anti-Congress Janata Party (of which the BJP's predecessor the Jana Sangh was a key constituent.)

Over the past quarter century and in lockstep with the bourgeoisie the Stalinists have shifted further far to the right, supporting governments openly committed to neo-liberal reforms and pro-US policies. In doing so they have invariably invoked the threat of the Hindu supremacist BJP, while touting the Congress and a host of caste-based and regional communalist parties as allies, if not bulwarks, in the defence of secularism.

The end result of this policy of chaining the working class to the bourgeois has been to give the ruling class a free hand in implementing neo-liberal restructuring and otherwise strengthen bourgeois reaction

The claim that the Congress and the likes of the AIADMK can be instruments for fighting communal reaction is absurd. All sections of the bourgeois establishment have adapted to and connived with the Hindu right and employ communal and casteist appeals to advance the interests of the respective factions of the bourgeoisie for which they speak and to divide the working class.

Even more fundamentally, in so far as the working class is blocked from advancing a socialist program to defend its interests and those of all the toilers and oppressed, the socially incendiary bourgeois economic “reforms” are creating the crisis, disorientation, and despair on which social reaction battens.

It is high time for India's workers and socialist-minded intellectuals and youth to draw a historical balance sheet of the reactionary politics of Stalinism. They are the outcome not of the internationalist tradition of the Russian Revolution, but of the nationalist-opportunist ideology spawned by the privileged bureaucracy that under Stalin's leadership usurped power from the Soviet working class and ultimately restored capitalism in the former USSR.

A new mass party of the Indian working class must be built based on the program of Permanent Revolution and as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Indian workers must tear themselves free of the parties of the bourgeoisie, including the Stalinist parties and their union apparatuses, and rally the toilers around them in the fight for socialism in South Asia and around the globe.

This is the only viable answer to the bourgeoisie's drive to “develop” Indian capitalism through the impoverishment and brutal exploitation of the vast majority and its turn to communal reaction and authoritarian methods of rule, as exemplified by its embrace of Modi, to implement this callous program.



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