

India: Open rift in Stalinist CPM

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A long-running rift within the top leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the country's principal Stalinist parliamentary party, has now broken into the open. The rift revolves around whether to pursue an alliance with the Congress Party, historically the premier party of the Indian bourgeoisie, or to continue working for a Third Front, that is an alliance with a host of caste-ist and regional parties, all of them erstwhile allies of the Congress or the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The rift pits the current CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat against Politburo member Sitaram Yechury and much of the party leadership in West Bengal, for decades the CPM's principal base of electoral support. Yechury has long been considered the "number two" man in the CPM and is said to be preparing to vie for the party's top post at the CPM congress next April.

The differences within the CPM leadership have been enormously exacerbated by a series of electoral debacles that began in 2009 with the halving of the party's representation in the national parliament. In 2011, the CPM-led state governments in Kerala and West Bengal were ousted, bringing in the latter case an end to 34 years of uninterrupted CPM rule.

In last May's general election, the CPM suffered a further body-blow. Ten years after the CPM-led Left Front had emerged as the third largest bloc in parliament with some sixty seats, its parliamentary representation was reduced to a mere dozen.

The collapse in the Stalinists' electoral support is a direct product of their role in implementing the Indian bourgeoisie's neo-liberal economic "reform" program which aims to make India a cheap-labour hub for world capital. Since 1991 the CPM has propped up a series of rightwing national governments, most of them led by the Congress, that have funneled tax concessions to big business and the rich, while slashing social spending, and implementing privatization and deregulation.

In 2004, the CPM was instrumental in putting together the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government. The Stalinists continued to prop up the minority UPA government for the next four years, even as they conceded that it was pursuing pro-big business and pro-US policies little different from those of the BJP-led government that had preceded it.

Moreover, in West Bengal and Kerala, CPM-led governments have ruthlessly carried out similar "pro-investor" policies. This has included banning strikes by workers in the IT and IT-enabled industries and bloodily suppressing peasant opposition to the expropriation of their lands for big business projects.

It was the Stalinists' systematic suppression of the class struggle, exemplified by their close identification with the Congress Party, that enabled the ultra-rightwing, communalist BJP

to exploit the popular anger over mass unemployment, double-digit inflation and corruption and sweep the polls last May.

In the half-year since its rout in the 2014 elections, the CPM has had very little to say in way of an explanation—a silence that is indicative of the extent of its crisis.

After several rounds of meetings, the Politburo adopted a statement drafted by Karat that reportedly argues that the party has been pursuing an erroneous "tactical line" for the past 25 years. But, in what is a very rare occurrence within the CPM, Yechury challenged Karat's statement when it was presented to the Central Committee (CC) for approval in late October. In the counter-statement that Yechury presented to the CC, he blamed the party's decline on "organizational failures" during Karat's nine years as CPM General Secretary.

Yechury's criticisms were reportedly backed by a majority of the CC. In any event, such was the extent of the opposition the Politburo was compelled to withdraw the policy statement drafted by Karat and announce that it will prepare a new draft for a CC meeting in January.

While neither Karat nor Yechury has publicly elaborated on their differences, it is clear that the dispute revolves around which rightwing course the CPM should follow.

Both are wholly identified with the CPM's support for, and when in state government implementation of, the Indian bourgeoisie's economic "reform" program. Neither has uttered so much as a word of criticism of the West Bengal CPM's open solicitation of big business support and pursuit of what it itself calls "pro-investor" policies.

Yechury and much of the party's West Bengal leadership want an open alliance with the Congress Party, which as a result of last May's election has been reduced to little more than a rump. Such an orientation would in all likelihood include willingness to participate in Congress-led governments. (Between 2004 and 2008, the CPM and its Left Front were the Congress Party's most important parliamentary allies and regularly participated in the formulation of government policy, but the CPM declined the Congress's offer of cabinet seats, preferring to support the government "from the outside.")

Karat and his faction want the CPM to continue to keep some distance from the Congress and instead pursue electoral alliances with such rightwing one-time BJP and Congress allies as the Tamil Nadu-based AIDMK and DMK, the Uttar Pradesh-based Samajwadi Party, the Janata Dal (United), and the Oriya-based BJD.

Karat's opposition to formally allying with the Congress is entirely tactical. After all, it was under his leadership that the CPM

helped bring the Congress-led UPA to power in 2004 and sustained it in office for four full years, that is until the Congress chose to break with the Stalinists so as to push forward with the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal and the cementing of a strategic partnership between New Delhi and Washington.

Speaking just days after the CC meeting at which the differences within the party leadership had come to a head, Karat reiterated that in “the fight against the BJP government ... and particularly against the danger posed by the Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) forces led by the RSS,” the CPM “will cooperate with all secular forces.”

The CPM has long touted the Congress as a secular bulwark and indeed for the past quarter century has repeatedly justified its support for Congress-led governments on the ground that this is the only way to keep the BJP at bay and defend thereby Indian “secularism.”

Following a Nov. 5 meeting of the CPM’s West Bengal State Committee, Karat was even more explicit about the possibility of the Stalinists blocking with the Congress in the name of defeating the BJP. Said Karat: “The matter is open to debate and I have no problem with that. Let members of the Central Committee engage in a free and fair discussion on whom to align with or not. They can come up with any suggestion on the party’s political-tactical line.”

On Nov. 17 both Karat and Yechury attended a Congress Party event marking the 125th birth anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru, the founder of the Nehru-Gandhi Congress political dynasty and independent India’s first prime minister. This was the first time top CPM leaders had participated in a Congress function since they withdrew support for the Congress-led UPA in July 2008.

In an attempt to downplay the significance of his participation in the event, Karat said he had attended because the CPM recognizes Nehru’s “enormous contribution ... to the making of a secular Indian state and his role in establishing a parliamentary democratic system. Nothing more should be read into our participation.”

Karat’s remarks underscore the Stalinists’ allegiance to the Indian bourgeois state which was founded through the deal that the Congress of Nehru and M.K. Gandhi struck with British imperialism in 1947 to suppress the mass anti-imperialist movement that had convulsed South Asia in the first half of the Twentieth Century and partition the Indian subcontinent along communal lines into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

The rift within the CPM leadership has an important regional dynamic, with Yechury, who originates from Andhra Pradesh, drawing much of his support from West Bengal and Karat, who hails from Kerala, having the support of the Kerala state unit.

It is an open secret that much of West Bengal party leadership opposed the decision to withdraw support for the Congress Party-led UPA in July 2008, because they feared it would facilitate an electoral alliance between the Congress and the West Bengal-based Trinamool Congress (TMC).

With support for the CPM in West Bengal dropping precipitously since its twin electoral routs in 2011 and 2014, the party leadership is anxious to ally with the Congress, fearing that otherwise it will be marginalized in the official politics of the state

by the rise of the TMC, which now form the state government, and the BJP.

In Kerala, by contrast, the CPM continues to view the Congress Party, which currently forms the state government, as its principal competitor.

The Indian bourgeoisie turned to the would-be Hindu strongman Narendra Modi and his BJP in the 2014 elections calculating that they could be used to dramatically intensify the assault on the working class. The Stalinists have responded to this intensification of the class struggle by shifting still further right.

The shipwreck of the CPM is the outcome of the nationalist-Stalinist politics it has pursued since it was formed fifty years in a split from its now close ally, the even more decrepit Communist Party of India (CPI). Like the CPI, the CPM has always opposed the struggle for the political independence of the working class and socialism. In an earlier period the Stalinists did so claiming that workers and toilers must first assist the “progressive” and “anti-imperialist” wing of the Indian bourgeoisie in completing the democratic revolution. Now they frankly declare that to build Indian capitalism foreign investment must be welcomed, holding up China as a model.

A new mass party of the Indian working class must be built on the basis of Permanent Revolution, the program that animated the 1917 Russian Revolution and the subsequent struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International against the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR. Only through a working-class led socialist revolution can the basic needs of India’s workers and toilers, including the outstanding tasks of the democratic revolution, such as the liquidation of landlordism and caste-ism, be realized.



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