

Indian Stalinists meet amid political-organizational crisis

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India's main Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, will hold its 21st Congress in the southern port city of Visakapatnam over five days this week, beginning Tuesday.

An integral part of India's political establishment for decades, the CPM is meeting under conditions of unparalleled political-organizational crisis.

Support for the CPM within the working-class and rural poor has hemorrhaged as a result of its leading role in implementing the bourgeoisie's drive to transform India into a global hub of cheap-labor production through privatization, deregulation, social spending cuts, and ever-diminishing corporate tax rates.

For two decades starting in 1989, the CPM propped up a string of rightwing national governments in parliament, many of them led by the Congress, the bourgeoisie's traditional governing party. And in those states where it formed the government, principally West Bengal and Kerala, the CPM implemented what it itself described as "pro-investor" policies.

As a result, the CPM has suffered a series of electoral debacles that have reduced it to a rump in the national parliament and left it governing a lone state, tiny Tripura. In last May's general election, the CPM and the CPM-led Left Front were utterly incapable of capitalizing on the mass opposition to the Congress government over mass unemployment, skyrocketing food prices, and ever-widening social inequality. While the Hindu supremacist BJP swept to power, winning India's first parliamentary majority in three decades, the CPM captured just nine seats and the Left Front as a whole a mere dozen. This was far and away the Stalinists' worst-ever showing in a national election.

In the eleven months since, the CPM has been riven

by defections, feuding over who is responsible for the party's decline, and differences over whether the party should maintain the current rightwing course or pursue even closer relations with the Congress Party.

Last fall, Sitaram Yechury, a longtime Politburo member, openly challenged the Politburo majority, led by the outgoing national secretary Prakash Karat, and submitted a counter document to the Central Committee on the party's "political-tactical line." Yechury has long been associated with a West Bengal-based CPM faction that argues the party ought not to have withdrawn support for the Congress-led government in 2008 when it decided to push forward with the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord so as to cement a global strategic partnership with US imperialism.

This faction is uneasy with the current CPM policy of ostensible joint opposition to the Congress and BJP. It believes the CPM should not shut the door to renewing the explicit alliance it had with the Congress between 2004 and 2008—an alliance the Stalinists maintained even as they conceded that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government was pursuing neo-liberal policies little different from those of the BJP-led government that preceded it.

In the documents submitted to this week's CPM congress, these differences have been papered over. Nonetheless they could well break into the open, whether directly or in the contest to succeed Karat, who is constitutionally-obligated to step down as party head, having already served three successive terms as national secretary. Yechury is known to be seeking the party's top job and according to some press reports is gaining some support from Kerala, hitherto strongly in Karat's camp.

The documents submitted by the party leadership

reassert the CPM's longstanding call for a "Left Democratic Front," an alliance that explicitly includes the purported "progressive" sections of the bourgeoisie and which has found practical expression in the CPM's decades-long pursuit of electoral and parliamentary alliances with a host of rightwing regional and caste-ist parties. Time and again, the CPM has given "pro-poor" and "secular" credentials to erstwhile Congress and BJP allies like the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and its rival Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, and the Biju Janatha Dal (BJD) in Odisha.

Underscoring that the CPM intends to work to shackle the inevitable mass working-class opposition to the BJP government to these and like reactionary political forces, the CPM's political resolution welcomes the proposed merger of the Samajwadi Party (SP), Rastriya Janatha Dal (RJD), Janatha Dal (United) [JD(U)], Janatha Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and Samajwadi Janatha Party (SJP) into a single party. "If this materializes," says the resolution, "they can emerge as an effective force in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and some other pockets in North India."

At the same time, the resolution leaves open the door to a possible alliance with the Congress, if not directly then through alliances with parties that themselves have electoral understandings with the Congress, or in various "anti-communal" fronts. "Given the danger posed by the communal forces," declares the CPM resolution, "we should strive for the broadest mobilization of secular and democratic forces. Joint platforms are necessary for a wider united movement against communalism."

In reality, the Stalinists' systematic subordination of the working class to the Congress and other "secular" bourgeois parties is what has created the political conditions for the growth of the BJP and the Hindu supremacist right as a whole. The Congress has itself repeatedly connived with the Hindu right, and the neo-liberal policies pursued by all sections of the political establishment have fueled the social crisis that, absent a clear alternative from the working class, rightwing elements can feed off in promoting communalism and all manner of social reaction.

In the run-up to the congress, the CPM leadership has

been forced to concede that the party is in a shambles, with a declining and aging membership and numerous instances of the "erosion of party standards and communist values," including corruption, nepotism, adherence to caste prejudices and adaptation to communalism.

The CPM's political-organizational crisis is particularly pronounced in West Bengal, the east Indian state that the CPM ruled for 34 years continuously, from 1977 to 2011. Hundreds, likely thousands, of party cadres in West Bengal have joined the Hindu supremacist BJP, which the CPM has long denounced as the greatest threat to "democratic India" and on that basis argued for all manner of reactionary alliances with the Congress Party and other bourgeois parties.

Many of the defectors have justified jumping ship to the BJP with the claim that the CPM is too weak to protect them from violence perpetrated by goons working for the Trinamul Congress, the rightwing party that now forms West Bengal's government. Others like multi-millionaire industrialist Shishir Bajoria have explained their abandoning the CPM for the BJP with the frank admission that it is the best way to gain access to money and power. "The CPM is no more a force in Bengal," Bajoria told the *Kolkata Telegraph* last August. "The BJP is the new order that can bring about change in Bengal."

What this phenomenon underscores is the extent to which CPM rule in West Bengal, especially after it called a halt to further land and other capitalist reforms in the mid-1980s, was bound up with ever closer and subservient relations with big business and a corrupt patronage network that stretched from Kolkata into the West Bengal countryside. Shorn of office, the CPM's patronage network has collapsed and its big business patrons have moved on to greener pastures.



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