

India: Stalinist CPM begins its 21st congress

Our correspondents in Visakhapatnam
16 April 2015

India's main Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM began its 21st Congress on Tuesday.

Open to the press, the inaugural session of the six-day congress heard speeches from the outgoing CPM general-secretary, Prakash Karat, other CPM leaders, and representatives of the CPM's "left" allies.

All emphasized the urgent need to build "left unity" so as to regain influence with India's bourgeois political establishment.

The congress's "clear and categorical message to the people," said Karat, is that the "only alternative to the neoliberal corrupt and communal order is the Left and Democratic alternative."

For decades, the Indian Stalinists have forged electoral alliances and governmental coalitions with various big-business, casteist and regional parties—including the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional governing party, the Congress Party. They have justified these reactionary maneuvers, including support for the implementation of what they themselves call "pro-investor" policies, with the claim that they are working for the development of a "Left and Democratic alternative," embracing the "progressive" wing of the bourgeoisie, that will implement "pro-people" measures, i.e. a national-capitalist reform program.

"It is by forging Left unity," continued Karat, "that we can rally all other democratic forces and go forward towards building a Left and Democratic alternative."

CPM Polit Bureau Member S. Ramachandran Pillai, who chaired the inaugural session, echoed Karat's claim that a "united left" will be better-positioned to make alliances with other sections of the bourgeois establishment. "The unity of Left parties," claimed Pillai, "can act as the nucleus of the forces that can be rallied against the neoliberal economic policies, the attempts of the RSS-led Hindutva forces to advance their communal agenda, the pro-imperialist tilt in the foreign policies and the growing trends of authoritarianism of the BJP-led Modi government."

The 77-year-old Pillai is reportedly the choice of Karat, who is a generation younger, to succeed him as general-secretary. Karat, who is prohibited by the party constitution

from running for a fourth term as party leader, is by all accounts anxious to prevent fellow Polit Bureau member Sitaram Yechury from getting the top job. Yechury is identified with a West Bengal-based faction of the CPM that advocates a resumption of close ties with the Congress Party in opposition to Karat's policy of privileging alliances with various regional bourgeois parties.

Under Karat's leadership, the CPM and its Left Front were for four years the principal parliamentary ally of the Congress Party and its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government. The de facto Stalinist-Congress coalition collapsed only in July 2008 when, over the CPM's strenuous objections, the Congress proceeded with the implementation of the Indio-US civilian nuclear accord, cementing thereby an Indo-US "global strategic partnership."

Three of the "left" parties whose representatives addressed the inaugural session of the CPM's 21st congress are longtime members of its Left Front. They are the Communist Party of India or CPI (from which those who formed the CPM broke in 1964), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and the All-India Forward Bloc (AIFB). They were joined on the congress podium by leaders of two Maoist groups—the Socialist Unity Center of India (Communist) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (Liberation)—that were inducted into the Left Front last year.

The induction of the latter two groups was aimed at refurbishing the CPM's tattered "left" credentials and propping up the Left Front, which has been riven by factional infighting in the wake of a series of election debacles stretching back to 2009.

CPM-led state governments were turfed from office in West Bengal and Kerala in state elections in 2011 and in last year's all-India election the Left Front captured just 12 seats, less than a fifth of the number it won in 2004.

All of the CPM's "left allies" have a long record of politically suppressing the working class.

The CPI was a junior coalition partner of Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as she smashed the 1974 national rail strike, then imposed a two-year Emergency during which

basic civil liberties were suspended and tens of thousands of leftists, as well as other opponents of the government, were jailed.

In 2007-8, the Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) helped channel the opposition of villagers to the CPM-led West Bengal state government's plans to expropriate land for big-business projects behind the rightwing Trinamool Congress (TMC). They thereby assisted the ex-Congress leader and one-time BJP ally Mamata Banerjee in cynically recasting herself as a "friend of the poor." The SUCI jointly contested the 2009 national and 2011 West Bengal elections as a junior partner of Banerjee and her TMC.

Last year the RSP quit the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala and joined the state's ruling coalition, the Congress-led United Democratic Front after a seat-sharing squabble with the CPM. However, it remains part of the Left Front at the "national" level and in West Bengal.

Under conditions of a hemorrhaging in the CPM's working-class support and a spectacular decline in the Stalinists' electoral fortunes, the party leadership was at pains to manufacture enthusiasm at the opening of the party congress, which is being held in Visakhapatnam, a port city in southeastern India. Party supporters waved red flags and a small group of union officials and workers, including some from Visakhapatnam's shipyards, steel mills, fishing industry, and day care centers, greeted the 900 delegates with "Red salutes."

Along the path from the gates of the premises to the congress hall there were red banners with slogans like "Resist neoliberal policies," "We shall fight, we shall win", "Socialism is the future: The futures is ours," "Workers of the world unite," and "Fight imperialism."

All of this was so much demagogy, as was rapidly underscored by the Stalinists leaders' avowals that they intend to redouble their efforts to chain the mass working-class opposition that will soon emerge to Narendra Modi's BJP government to its bourgeois political opponents.

Significantly, in his opening address, Karat hailed the victory of Syriza in Greece's recent parliamentary election. "The people of Greece," said the CPM general-secretary, "have rebuffed these austerity measures and put in place a government which has promised to adopt an alternative path. This has opened a new political dimension to the ongoing struggles against neoliberalism and austerity in Europe."

Karat made no mention of the fact that Syriza, which speaks for a section of the Greek bourgeoisie, quickly betrayed its promises to oppose austerity and within weeks of assuming office pledged to fully implement the scorched-earth austerity program of the "troika"—the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund.

In his short speech, Karat also praised Babasaheb

Ambedkar as "the architect of the Indian Constitution," which he lauded as having provided India with "secular democratic foundations." No matter that the Indian Republic was founded on the betrayal of the mass anti-imperialist movement that had convulsed South Asia in the first half of the 20th century, in a deal with British imperialism that secured the property of the capitalists and landlords and partitioned the subcontinent along communal lines into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India.

Reminding delegates that Tuesday was the 124th anniversary of Ambedkar's birth, Karat claimed that the Untouchable (Dalit) leader had been an indefatigable fighter for social justice and opponent of the caste system. Later he garlanded a statue of Ambedkar in Visakhapatnam, while hailing him for carrying out an "uncompromis[ing] battle for the cause of the downtrodden sections." In fact, Ambedkar, a Columbia University-trained sociologist, was a vehement opponent of Marxism and socialist revolution who served as the British colonial regime's Minister of Labour from 1942-46. He was a key promoter of the British-designed reservation system (affirmative action) which has served to constitutionalize and further entrench the reactionary caste system, giving rise to rival Dalit and lower-caste elites who promote caste identities and politics, while the vast majority of the Dalits and lower castes continue to live in dire poverty.

At the conclusion of the inaugural session of the CPM congress, Yechury read out seven of the twenty-five "greetings" sent by fraternal "Communist and workers'" parties. Those read out included messages from the Chinese Communist Party, that is, the party that having restored capitalism to China now presides over the brutal exploitation of the Chinese working class by domestic and world capital, and from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the remnant of the Stalinist regime that murdered Trotsky, destroyed the cadre of Lenin's Bolshevik Party, and, in its ultimate betrayal, liquidated the Soviet Union and restored capitalism.



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