

# Indian Stalinist leaders divided over alliance with big business Congress Party

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Leaders of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, issued denials this week that their party is seeking to jointly contest this spring's West Bengal state assembly elections with the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government.

Speaking to the *Indian Express* on Monday, CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury claimed that "Electoral alliances are now not on the agenda." When asked by the *Express* about the possibility of a tie-up with the Congress, he said the party's policy is "no front or alliance with the Congress."

CPM Politburo member Brinda Karat made similar comments, telling reporters, "Whatever is being said about an electoral alliance with Congress in West Bengal is speculation and there is no truth in it."

These denials are entirely hypocritical. They come after weeks of open discussion by top CPM leaders and state-level officials about the possibility of an electoral bloc with the Congress. On Saturday, former CPM West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee called on the Congress to align with the CPM and its Left Front at a party rally in Singur. "We ask the Congress," said Bhattacharjee, "which side are you on? We need to be together to save West Bengal."

In his *Indian Express* interview, Yechury brazenly tried to "reinterpret" this statement. With a straight face, he claimed that Bhattacharjee was only seeking to underline the CPM's "determination to oust" West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress state government. Bhattacharjee's remarks, insisted Yechury, had nothing to do with an appeal to Congress for an electoral alliance.

The CPM general secretary said the party's stance is in accordance with the political line of its 21st Congress held last year, which declared that "The main direction of our attack should be against the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) when it is in power but this cannot mean having an electoral understanding with the Congress."

However, as the *World Socialist Web Site* in its coverage of the CPM Congress explained, and as even the bourgeois press has noted in many of its recent articles, the Stalinists gave themselves an "escape clause" in regards to their relations with the big business Congress Party. The same policy document that Yechury cited declares, "There can be swift changes in the

political situation. New contradictions may emerge amongst the bourgeois parties and within them ... Flexible tactics should be evolved to deal with the situation." (See: "Indian Stalinists meet amid political-organizational crisis")

In recent weeks, numerous CPM leaders, Yechury included, have repeatedly invoked this "flexible tactics" formula when speaking of the party's approach to the West Bengal state elections.

For his part, Prakash Karat, Yechury's predecessor as general secretary, speaking to reporters at the conclusion of a four-day plenum on party organization December 30, indicated an electoral tie-up with the Congress was far from precluded. "There is a popular mood to oust the TMC [Trinamul Congress] government," declared Karat. "Regarding alliance with Congress, we will take it into account when we will discuss the electoral tactics."

Expressing the CPM's consummate opportunism, Karat went on to say: "There's no 'yes' or 'no' in politics. ... Tactics can change on the situation evolving at a particular time." He then insisted that West Bengal was in an "extraordinary situation" and that the CPM would have to take this into account in devising its election strategy.

Karat, in contradistinction to Yechury, is identified as a leader of the CPM's "hardline" faction that has generally opposed formally allying with the Congress Party, preferring "Third Front" alliances with regional and caste-based parties. Yet, it was under Karat's leadership that the Stalinists and their Left Front propped up the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government (UPA) at the Centre from 2004-2008 as it forged an Indo-US "strategic partnership" and pressed forward with "neo-liberal" reform.

That the CPM leadership has been considering an electoral alliance with the Congress is symptomatic of its deep crisis and alienation from and hostility toward India's workers and toilers.

The Congress, which over the past quarter-century has spearheaded the bourgeoisie's drive to transform India into a sweatshop for global capitalism and a junior partner of US imperialism, is in unprecedented crisis. It has been eliminated as a major player in large parts of India and failed to win enough seats to even be recognized as the Official Opposition

in the 2014 national election.

The CPM, as a result of its pursuit of what it has itself described as “pro-investor” policies in West Bengal and support for the big business UPA government in New Delhi, has suffered a series of electoral debacles since 2009. In 2011 it fell from power in West Bengal, after 34 years of leading the state’s government and in the 2014 national elections it won just two of West Bengal’s 42 seats.

There are two main reasons that the CPM leadership has drawn back, at least for the moment, from forging a formal electoral alliance with the Congress Party for the West Bengal election.

First, there is considerable opposition to such an alliance from the CPM unit in Kerala, the only other major state in which the CPM has ever led the government.

In Kerala, where state elections are also to take place this spring, the chief rival of the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) is the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF).

The UDF, which has held power since 2011, has been rocked by a series of scandals and otherwise discredited due to its right-wing socioeconomic policies. The Kerala state CPM is hoping that it can benefit from this to return to office and, toward that end, continues to welcome Congress defectors into the LDF’s ranks and pursue alliances with other right-wing forces.

Nonetheless, it fears a CPM-Congress electoral alliance in West Bengal would blunt the edge of its attack on the UDF and enable the BJP to tout itself as the “real opposition” to the Congress in Kerala. “Whatever electoral tactical line we adopt in Kerala or West Bengal should not be contradictory or harmful to each other,” declared Kerala Stalinist leader M.A. Baby.

The second reason the CPM leadership has apparently drawn back from publicly pursuing an electoral bloc with the Congress is that the All-India Congress high command, led by Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, is opposed to such an alliance.

According to press reports, the leadership of the West Bengal Congress wrote to Sonia Gandhi, the national Congress Party president, at the end of last year, seeking authorisation to form an electoral alliance with the CPM and its Left Front. “A Congress-Left Front seat adjustment with a declared common minimum programme would dethrone the TMC government and usher in a Congress-Left Front alliance in West Bengal,” the general secretary of the West Bengal Congress, O.P. Mishra, informed Gandhi.

But no authorisation has been forthcoming. Instead, when Mamata Banerjee traveled to New Delhi this month she met with Sonia Gandhi, for what the *Deccan Herald* reported as a friendly exchange.

According to news reports, the national Congress leadership is looking to the 2019 national election and calculates an accommodation with the Trinamul Congress will help it oust Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government.

The Congress Party national leadership has also taken the

measure of the Stalinists, with whom they worked very closely between 2004 and 2008 when the Left Front was providing the UPA with the votes that it needed to retain office. The Congress high command likely calculates that if and when they deem it in their interests to seek the Stalinists’ support in opposing the BJP such support will be forthcoming. To this day, the Stalinists promote the Congress as a “secular” bulwark against the Hindu supremacist BJP.

To the embarrassment of the CPM, only one of its three main Left Front allies in West Bengal, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, was ready to support a tie-up with the Congress. Both the Communist Party of India (CPI), the other main Stalinist parliamentary party, and the All India Forward Block (AIFB) voiced their opposition to aligning with Congress, no doubt at least in part because such an alliance would cost them influence and potentially assembly seats.

This spring’s state assembly elections will take place under conditions of intensifying class struggle.

With India’s economy failing to return to the high growth rates of the last decade, domestic and international capital are clamouring for Modi to move even more aggressively in pushing through socially incendiary pro-investor reforms.

Working class opposition is developing against the Modi government. Last September, tens of millions of workers participated in a one-day protest strike called by the trade unions including those controlled by Stalinists to deflect the mass anger against the BJP government’s attacks.

The CPM, as exemplified by its recent flirtation with the Congress in West Bengal, is working to chain the working class to the parties of big business, including a host of regional and casteist parties, many of them former close allies of the BJP, like the Bihar-based Janata Dal (United).

The CPM continues to defend and promote the “industrialization” policy it pursued in West Bengal under Bhattacharjee’s leadership. In the name of that policy, the CPM-led West Bengal government made massive tax concessions to big business, banned strikes in IT-enabled industries, and used police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to land expropriations for big business projects. The main theme of Saturday’s rally at which Bhattacharjee appealed for Congress to join with the CPM was the need to return the Stalinists to government so they can press forward with their pro-investor “industrialisation” drive.

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