

India: Stalinists to ally with Congress Party in West Bengal election

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India's main Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, plans to jointly contest this spring's West Bengal state election with the big business Congress Party.

The CPM and the Congress have already started holding joint rallies across the state. They are also promoting their alliance on the walls of Kolkata, the state capital, with graffiti that reads, "With the hand [the Congress election symbol] holding the hammer and sickle [the CPM's symbol], Trinamool will be ousted from Bengal." A Bengal regionalist party that split off from the Congress in 1998, the Trinamool (Grassroots) Congress has formed West Bengal's state government since 2011, when it swept the polls, ending 34 consecutive years of rule by the CPM and its Left Front allies.

In joining hands with the Congress, the CPM is once again aligning with the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government—with the party that in 1991 initiated the drive to transform India into a cheap-labor haven for global capital and that has done most of the heavy-lifting over the past quarter-century in implementing neo-liberal "reform" and developing a strategic partnership between India and US imperialism. From 2004 to 2008, the CPM and the CPM-led Left Front propped up a Congress-led Indian government in parliament, on the utterly fraudulent grounds that the Congress was a "secular" bulwark against the Hindu supremacist BJP and could be pressured into pursuing "pro-people" policies.

The CPM Central Committee (CC) authorised an electoral tie-up with the Congress at a two-day meeting that ended February 18, although it contradicts the CPM's official "political-tactical line." At its party congress last April, the CPM formally committed to oppose both of the Indian bourgeoisie's principal parties, the Congress and the BJP.

In a transparent attempt to obscure the party's trashing of its own policy and to paper over bitter divisions within the party leadership, the CPM CC issued a statement that gave the West Bengal CPM the green light it had been demanding for an alliance with the Congress while omitting any

mention of the Congress.

In West Bengal, declared the CC, the CPM "will seek the cooperation of all democratic forces...to defeat the Trinamul Congress [and] isolate the BJP and their machinations".

With the support of CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury, the West Bengal CPM leadership had publicly campaigned for a CPM-Congress electoral alliance for weeks. Such was the vigor with which it pressed its demand for a tie-up with the big business Congress, some of its factional opponents within the CPM Politburo and CC raised concerns the majority of the West Bengal leadership might break away.

The West Bengal CPM leadership was quick to hail the outcome of the CC meeting. Speaking on February 18, just hours after the meeting's conclusion, a leader of the CPM's West Bengal State Committee said it had already agreed to "to talk to all Left, secular and democratic forces, including the Congress."

Another state party leader said the CPM might employ the "Siliguri model" in the upcoming state assembly election. This is a reference to the "informal"—i.e., not publicly announced—seat-sharing agreement the CPM made with the Congress last year for municipal and panchayat (rural) elections in Siliguri. With the tacit-backing of the Congress, the CPM topped the polls in both elections, and local party leader Ashok Bhattacharya became Siliguri mayor.

In an interview with the *Indian Express* published February 19, West Bengal Congress leader Adhir Ranjan said that talks between state units of the CPM and the Congress about how they would divvy up the assembly seats between them "have been on for some time." According to the most recent news reports, a CPM-Congress seat-sharing deal awaits only final agreement on the number of seats to be given to the Congress and the sanction of the Congress high command in Delhi, which initially favoured an election alliance with the Trinamool Congress.

According to the Kolkata *Telegraph*, the CPM is proposing the Congress be allotted 75 seats, which would leave the CPM and its Left Front allies the remaining 219 in

the 294-member West Bengal state assembly. “The state Congress should be happy as we are offering more seats than [Trinamool Congress head and West Bengal Chief Minister] Mamata Banerjee ever gave them,” a CPM state secretariat member told the *Telegraph*. In the run-up to last month’s CC meeting, the CPM leadership in Kerala, the only other major state where the CPM has ever led the government, and Yechury’s predecessor as CPM general-secretary, Prakash Karat, publicly opposed an alliance with the Congress in West Bengal.

This opposition was never anything more than a disagreement over which right-wing course the Stalinists should follow. The Kerala CPM warned that an alliance with the Congress in West Bengal would undermine the prospects of the CPM-left Left Democratic Front unseating the Congress-led United Democratic Front in the Kerala state assembly elections, which are also due this spring. Karat and his allies also expressed concern that a tie-up with the popularly discredited Congress would only bring further disrepute to the Stalinists, whose electoral base among workers and toilers has hemorrhaged as a result of their implementing what they themselves term “pro-investor” policies.

Ultimately, the Kerala CPM leadership declared itself satisfied with the CC statement because it didn’t explicitly endorse an alliance with the Congress. Speaking to the press, Kerala CPM leaders said that they had nothing against an electoral understanding with the big business, pro-imperialist Congress, just not a formal alliance.

The Kerala CPM leadership, it should be recalled, voiced no objection to the CPM propping up the Congress-led UPA government for four years. As for Karat, he could not be more associated with the CPM’s support for the UPA since he was then the CPM’s general secretary.

Nevertheless, the speed, enthusiasm, and unbridled manner in which the West Bengal CPM has pursued an electoral pact with the Congress may well cause a further eruption of factional bickering and indeed sharp divisions within the CPM leadership.

The CPM has already announced that it will make “industrialisation” a major plank of its election campaign in West Bengal. In January, it organised a week-long march from Singur to Salboni to promote itself as the party that can best entice domestic and foreign capital to set up factories in West Bengal. At both Singur and Salboni, attempts by the CPM-led Left Front state government to expropriate land for big business projects failed due to mass opposition from farmers and agricultural workers whose livelihoods were threatened. Speaking in Salboni at the march’s conclusion, CPM State Secretary Surya Kanta Mishra criticised the Trinamool Congress government for “forcing industries out

of the state.” The CPM’s appeal for big business support as the party best able to create profitable investment conditions is entirely in line with its alliance with the big business Congress Party.

The CPM’s claim that it is allying with the Congress to “save democracy in West Bengal” is a reactionary fraud.

To be sure, Banerjee is a right-wing anti-communist demagogue, whose government uses brutal repressive measures against its political opponents, above all West Bengal’s workers and rural toilers. However, Congress governments at both the Union and state levels have no less a reactionary record. Far from defending “democracy” and “secularism,” the Congress has a decades-long record stretching back to the 1947 communal partition of India of conniving with the Hindu right.

In calling for an alliance with Congress to defend “democracy” and “secularism,” the Stalinists are pursuing the same reactionary line through which they have politically smothered the working class for decades, tying it to alliances with the Congress and a myriad of caste-ist and regional bourgeois parties. From 1989 through 2008, the CPM propped up a succession of right-wing governments at the Centre, most of them Congress-led, that implemented neo-liberal reforms, claiming that this was the only means of blocking the communalist BJP from coming to power. By preventing the working class from mobilising its class strength and advancing its independent class solution to the social crisis—socialism—the Stalinists have strengthened the bourgeoisie and social reaction, paving the way for the BJP to form India’s government and for the first time ever with a parliamentary majority.



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