

Indian Stalinist congress opts for alliance with big business Congress Party

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30 April 2018

India's main Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, has cleared the decks for an alliance with the Congress Party, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government and a party that the CPM itself denounces for having pursued a ruinous neo-liberal agenda for decades.

How closely the CPM should work with the Congress Party and whether it should publicly profess to be doing so were the subject of a bitter, months-long dispute within the CPM leadership. This dispute pitted party General Secretary Sitaram Yechury against his predecessor, Prakash Karat, and the CPM's principal state organizations, its West Bengal and Kerala units, against each other.

At the party's 22nd congress, held in Hyderabad from April 18-22, the faction, led by Yechury, that favors an explicit electoral alliance with the Congress Party prevailed.

On the third and final day of the debate on the party's main political resolution, Karat and other leaders of his faction agreed to replace the second half of a clause that said that whilst the CPM's principal immediate goal is to defeat India's Hindu supremacist Bharat Janata Party (BJP) government, it should do so "without having an understanding or electoral alliance with the Congress Party." The amended resolution, which subsequently won unanimous congress support, merely commits the CPM to not "having a political alliance" with Congress.

In the past, the CPM and the CPM-dominated Left Front have provided electoral backing to the Congress and propped up rightwing Congress Party-led minority governments in parliament, all the while claiming not to be in a "political alliance" with Congress.

Speaking to reporters at the conclusion of the CPM congress, Yechury said the party's state units will be free to work out their "electoral tactical line" for the national elections due in Spring 2019 based on the "ground realities" of their respective states and the party's new political line. Employing Stalinist doublespeak, he declared, "We will have no political alliance with the Congress. But we will have an understanding with it inside and outside (parliament) to stop communalism."

All of this is music to the ears of the CPM leadership in West Bengal, where the Left Front fell from power in 2011 after

pursuing what it itself called "pro-investor" policies and is now threatened with being reduced to a bit-player amid the political polarization between the BJP and the rightwing populist Trinamool Congress. In 2016, the West Bengal CPM, with Yechury's backing, defied directives from the CPM Politburo and Central Committee and formed a "grand alliance" with Congress to contest that year's state elections.

The corporate media has almost universally welcomed the CPM's overture to the Congress, calculating that it will strengthen the ruling elite against the working class.

Under conditions where the BJP government's austerity measures, "big bang" pro-investor reforms, and incitement of communalism are provoking ever-widening social opposition, India's ruling elite is depending on the Stalinists to channel it into the dead-end of electoral politics and futile appeals for the bourgeois establishment to adopt "pro-people" policies. This includes, should the BJP prove unable to contain the mounting opposition, the CPM reprising its leading role in forming and propping up a "secular" alternative big business government, and one preferably helmed by its "grand old party," the Congress.

In May 2004, when there was an unexpected electoral backlash against a previous BJP-led government, the CPM played a pivotal in rallying regional and caste-based opposition parties behind the Congress' bid to form a government. For the next four years, the Stalinists provided the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government with its parliamentary majority.

If anything, today's crisis-ridden Congress party is even more eager to work with the Stalinists. In the months leading up to the CPM congress, Congress Party leaders, including former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, repeatedly urged the Stalinists to join them in an anti-BJP "united front." With the help of the "Left," Congress hopes to make the population forget its role in spearheading the bourgeoisie's drive to transform India into a cheap-labour haven for global capital and in forging a "global strategic" partnership with US imperialism.

There are no principled differences between the rival Stalinist factions. Karat was general secretary when the CPM was keeping the Congress-led UPA in power and the West Bengal CPM-led government was outlawing strikes in IT and IT-

enabled industries and using police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to land expropriations for big business development projects.

Under the joint leadership of Karat and Yechury, the CPM has breathed no criticism of the Indian government's massive military build-up since 2000 or more generally of the Indian bourgeoisie's predatory great-power ambitions. And whilst the Stalinists decry the Indo-US military-strategic alliance, it is not from the standpoint of mobilizing the working class against the threat of war and in struggle against imperialism. Rather they appeal to the Indian bourgeoisie to reassert its "strategic autonomy" and distance itself from Washington so it can better pursue its own "national interests."

A major factor in the factional struggle in the CPM is the different electoral compulsions the party faces in West Bengal and Kerala. Whereas in the former the Stalinists believe they need an alliance with Congress if they are to remain a significant factor in the state's electoral politics, in Kerala, the Congress Party is their principal rival.

However, the Karat faction's push for the Stalinists to project themselves as resolute opponents of the Congress Party has also been driven by their fear that the CPM has been deeply discredited by its support for a succession of rightwing Congress-led governments over the past quarter-century. An unnamed CPM Politburo member from Kerala, in an interview with *India Today* on the sidelines of the party congress, said "some" of the delegates opposing "any truck with the Congress ... warned that playing like a 'B team' of the Congress would destroy the party in the long run."

In the Politburo's and Central Committee's preparatory meetings for the party congress, the Karat faction's position on relations with the Congress won out. But egged on by the West Bengal party leadership, Yechury, in a move virtually unprecedented in CPM history, insisted on exercising his right to present his "minority" view to the party congress.

The BJP's rout of the CPM-led state government in Tripura in state elections in early March further intensified the factional warfare.

Sensing the ground was shifting, Karat and his supporters sought to placate those advocating an "understanding" with Congress. This included spelling out that as part of an "Anybody but BJP" campaign in 2019 they would not be averse to directing voters to support the Congress in those states where it is the BJP's principal electoral opponent. Nor, they hastened to add, are they against the CPM forming electoral alliances with parties like the Tamil Nadu-based DMK that are also themselves allied with the Congress.

Moreover, never in doubt was the readiness of both factions to support a post-election Congress bid to form India's government, including providing it parliamentary support and working to convince other parties to ally with it, if that was the only or even best way to form a stable non-BJP government.

But for Yechury and his faction these concessions were

insufficient. They were determined to remove any impediments to an alliance with the Congress even if it required deepening the fissures within the party leadership.

To upend the plans of the Karat faction to have the congress adopt its line, the Yechury faction organized for delegates from at least 16 states to raise from the congress-floor the call for a secret ballot vote on the key motion to amend the main political resolution. Initially, Karat and his supporters resisted, with the former general-secretary telling the press there was no provision for secret-ballots in the party constitution. Clearly, they feared that some of their support would melt away in a secret ballot, including from the Kerala delegation.

It was under these conditions that the Karat faction ultimately made an about-face and allowed the stipulation barring an "understanding or electoral alliance" with the Congress to be deleted.

Similarly, the Karat faction backed down in a meeting of the top leadership on the penultimate day of the congress from challenging Yechury's election to a second term as party general secretary. Although Karat's supporters had suggested a number of potential challengers, including former Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarkar, in not-for-attribution comments to the press, ultimately Yechury's name went before the Central Committee unopposed.

When everything is said and done, the policy the CPM adopted at its just-concluded congress is only a more explicitly rightwing variant of the policy it has pursued for the past quarter-century. In the name of defeating the communalist BJP, it has systematically suppressed the class struggle, while harnessing the working class to the Congress Party and a slew of regional and caste-based parties, many of them erstwhile allies of the BJP.

It is this treacherous policy that has paved the way for the BJP to exploit popular anger over the fruits of the neo-liberal policies pursued by the Stalinist-back "secular governments"—rampant social inequality, chronic poverty, and deepening economic insecurity—and become the country's dominant political force.

To break out of this dangerous impasse, India's workers and toilers need an entirely new strategy—a strategy based on the independent political mobilization of the working class against all factions of the bourgeoisie and one that combines the fight against communal reaction and defence of democratic rights with the fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of society.



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