

Indian Elections:

Stalinist CPM faces debacle in its West Bengal “bastion”

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According to media reports, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM will be fortunate if it retains the two West Bengal Lok Sabha seats that it currently holds when the votes in India's multi-phase national election are tabulated this Thursday.

Not only has the CPM's traditional electoral base among the working class and rural poor hemorrhaged as a consequence of its role in implementing “pro-market” policies that have made India a cheap-labour haven for global capital and one of the world's most unequal societies, the CPM is in the midst of an organizational collapse.

According to its own admission, the CPM's West Bengal unit has lost almost 40 percent of its membership since 2010, and its once sizable apparatus is disintegrating, with party workers and even leaders deserting for the right-wing Trinamool Congress Party and, most tellingly, for the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Two former CPM members of the West Bengal state assembly—Mafuga Kutan and Khagen Murmu—are seeking election to the Lok Sabha under the BJP's banner; and across India's fourth most populous state, hundreds if not thousands of former CPM workers have similarly defected to the BJP and are now providing muscle on the ground for the far-right party that has formed India's national government since 2014, but which until recently was only a marginal force in West Bengal.

There are also widespread media claims that current low-level CPM cadre, with the connivance of a section of higher-up leaders, are assisting the BJP election campaign, so as to weaken West Bengal's ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC). Since ousting the Left Front in 2011, the TMC has used its control of the state apparatus to mount a campaign of violence and intimidation against the CPM, and supporters of the other components of the CPM-led Left Front, that has resulted in dozens of deaths.

The CPM leadership vehemently denies the claims its activists are conniving with the BJP. “A few corporate funded print media houses ... are publishing cooked up articles (alleging) that the Left cadres are helping BJP in its fight against Trinamool,” complained the CPM's English-language

weekly, *People's Democracy*.

But already in the 2018 panchayat (local) elections, CPM cadres in some areas struck no-contest agreements with the BJP, as CPM Nadia district secretary and state committee member Sumit De conceded, telling the *Times of India*, “Yes, there have been adjustments at the grassroots level. In many seats as the villagers had wanted one-to-one fight, we had to respect it.” For his part, CPM Central Committee member Sujan Chakraborty dismissed the CPM-BJP collaboration in 2018 as a few “isolated instances.”

What is incontrovertible is that the CPM's pro-capitalist politics—its support for and implementation of big business' neo-liberal economic reform agenda and support for the Indian bourgeoisie's great-power ambitions, including in its reactionary strategic rivalry with Pakistan—have helped pave the way for the growth of virulently right-wing forces both in the form of the TMC and the BJP, including within its own politically debased and corrupt ranks.

Needless to say, the Stalinists can provide no serious explanation for how people whom it promoted as “communist” legislators, veritable tribunes of the oppressed, are now to be found in the front ranks of the BJP—a party the CPM decries as fascist and which, in the name of countering, the Stalinists have justified time and again subordinating the working class to the big business Congress Party and various regional and caste-ist parties.

In fact, it is precisely the Stalinists' suppression of the class struggle—their preventing of the working class from advancing its own socialist program and rallying the toilers behind it against all sections of the Indian bourgeoisie—that has provided the political terrain for the BJP to grow, by exploiting the social frustration and despair produced by mounting economic insecurity and social inequality.

As for Kutan, the CPM legislator now standing for the BJP in the Jangipur Lok Sabha seat, she presents her defection to a party that combines Hindu supremacism with slavish support for big business and which, following on from the previous Congress-led government, has transformed India into a frontline state in the Washington's military-security offensive

against China, in the most matter of fact way.

“There is a leadership vacuum in the (CPM) after many leaders shifted to the BJP or the TMC,” Khutan told *The Print*. “Besides local leaders, hordes of grassroots workers across different levels have left, leaving the party in total disarray. I joined the BJP because there is nobody to give any direction, no strategy on how the party plans to take on the TMC.”

Khutan’s comments and the claims of the former CPM activists who have exchanged their red flags for the saffron banners of the Hindu right that they are embracing the BJP to oppose the TMC and shield themselves from its violence only serve to highlight the political collapse of the CPM and its role as a corrupt appendage of the Indian ruling class.

So discredited are the Stalinists and so alienated from the working class and toilers, they could make no credible appeal for support from them in the face of the violence of the TMC.

The defection of much of the CPM apparatus to either the TMC or the BJP exposes it to have been nothing more than a corrupt patronage network—one which itself deployed goon violence against working people as in the case of the violent November 2007 attack on peasants protesting against the Left Front government’s pro-big business policies.

Once shorn, as a result of the Left Front’s loss of power, of access to pelf and power and the protection of the West Bengal government-controlled security forces, the CPM “grassroots” network disintegrated.

For decades, West Bengal was the principal bastion of the CPM, providing the Stalinists through their control of the state government and the sizable numbers of MPs West Bengal sent to New Delhi with a significant place in the Indian bourgeois political establishment. For 34 years, ending in 2011, the CPM-led Left Front formed West Bengal’s state government uninterrupted.

When it first came to power in 1977, the Left Front instituted land and other limited reforms, securing a solid base of electoral support in rural West Bengal. But with the Stalinist bureaucracy restoring capitalism in the Soviet Union and the Indian bourgeoisie abandoning its state-led capitalist development project in favor of forging a new alliance with imperialism based on transforming India into a cheap labour haven for foreign capital, the CPM lurched further right. It abandoned its national-reformist program in favour of the implementation of socially incendiary “pro-investor” policies.

West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Jyoti Basu crassly justified the CPM’s drive to woo investors, with his infamous dismissal of socialism “as a far off cry.” But it was his successor and disciple, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, who in the first decade of the current century came into open conflict with West Bengal’s workers and toilers as he ruthlessly pursued pro-big business policies, closing down public sector units, setting up Special Economic Zones, and outlawing strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries.

In 2011, the Left Front government was ousted by Mamata

Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress Party. An anti-communist demagogue who previously had allied with the BJP, Banerjee was able to exploit the growing popular anger with the Left Front’s self-proclaimed “pro-investor” policies. Particularly important in this regard were her efforts, supported by the Maoists, to project the TMC as the foremost opponent of the Left Front government’s expropriation of the lands and livelihoods of impoverished peasants for big business development projects,

Since 2011, the CPM has suffered a series of electoral debacles in West Bengal. In 2014, the CPM captured just 2 of the state’s 42 Lok Sabha seats and its Left Front allies none. This constituted a net loss of 13 seats for the Left Front from the previous election in 2009, and 33 seats from the 2004 election.

In a desperate attempt to avert a similar wipeout in the 2016 state assembly elections, the CPM for the first time ever formed an open electoral bloc with the Congress Party, long its principal electoral rival in West Bengal and till recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government. The maneuver backfired. The Left Front lost half of its seats, suffered a further 11 percentage point-decline in its share of the popular vote, and the Congress, although with a far smaller vote-share, supplanted the Left Front as the official opposition. Nevertheless, the Stalinists were anxious to renew their alliance with Congress for the current election.

But the Congress rejected their overtures. This was both because the Congress high command knows full well that the Stalinists, as part of their reactionary “Anybody but BJP” campaign, are already committed to rallying support for the Congress wherever it is the BJP’s principal electoral opponent and to backing, if numbers permit, a Congress-led government; and because they did not want to alienate Bannerjee whose support they would likely need in any post-election bid for power.



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