

Tamil Nadu assembly elections held amid worsening social crisis in India

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Assembly elections will be held in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu starting on April 6. The southern Indian states of Kerala and Pondicherry (Puducherry) will go to the polls at the same time, while the eastern states of West Bengal and Assam will be held in phases starting on March 27. The Election Commission of India has stated that election results will be announced on May 2.

These elections take place amid a collapse in the living standards of India's working population due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and growing war tensions with China. Workers and farmers are entering into struggle against huge job losses and soaring prices for fuel and essential commodities.

The Indian bourgeoisie brought to power Narendra Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in 2014 to accelerate the pro-investor agenda of the previous Congress-led government of Manmohan Singh. Singh was one of the architects of deregulation and free-market policies in the 1990s, amid the Stalinist regime's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The BJP, the Congress and India's Stalinist and regionalist parties have all pushed to reopen the economy during the pandemic, even as the death toll surged to 158,642 today.

The result of the policies of the BJP and the Congress over the last decades is that India is one of the world's most unequal societies. The top one percent of Indian society has four times more wealth than the bottom 70 percent. Millions live in poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition.

For over a decade, moreover, the BJP and the Congress have worked to integrate India into Washington's strategic offensive against China. To this end, the BJP has opened its air and naval bases to US imperialism. In addition, it has developed India's military-security alliance with Washington's main Asia-

Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. This brings Asia to the brink of war between nuclear-armed states.

Edappadi Palanichamy's regionalist All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) government in Tamil Nadu is the BJP's ally in the region. It serves the interests of Indian big business and foreign investors in Tamil Nadu, facilitating brutal exploitation of workers by the corporations. It has developed a loose electoral alliance with the BJP and the caste-ist Proletarian People's Party (PMK).

The regionalist, Tamil-nationalist Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the main opposition party, is contesting the elections claiming it is running against rampant official corruption. The DMK's claim that it fundamentally opposes AIADMK corruption is all the less plausible in that the AIADMK emerged from a split within the DMK led by film star M. G. Ramachandran in 1972.

The We Tamil Party (Naam Tamilar Katchi - NTK) and other Tamil nationalists work to exploit the lack of a visible progressive alternative to the discredited DMK and AIADMK, or to the Congress and BJP. The NTK seeks to divide the working class by claiming Tamil Nadu must be ruled by ethnically Tamil persons, and inciting hatred against state workers, typically long-time residents of Tamil Nadu, who are not ethnically Tamil.

The Congress, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), the Indian Union Muslim League and the caste-ist Liberation Panthers of VCK are all set to join the DMK alliance.

The Indian Stalinist parties historically have demanded that workers seek a politically debilitating alliance with the bourgeois Congress party. They

support the Congress, claiming they are fighting for “secularism” against the BJP. By blocking the emergence of a movement opposing the Congress on its left, in the working class, they have allowed parties like the BJP and the NTK in Tamil Nadu to exploit frustration with poverty and unemployment created by Congress policies.

The DMK and AIADMK, which have alternated in power since the Congress lost control of the Tamil Nadu state government in 1967, are virtually indistinguishable for workers. Unable to win votes by campaigning among working people, they hire spin doctors such as the I-PAC (Indian Political Action Committee) or the OMG (One Mind Generation) to market themselves to voters.

Both speak for billionaires running huge media empires, directly tied to imperialist finance capital, and have brutally suppressed strikes and protests against their policies. In 1999, when tea plantation workers in Manjolai in the Tirunelveli district fought for a pay rise, the DMK government arrested 652 workers and imprisoned them in Trichy. Thousands of workers fought the arrest. The DMK government police attacked them and drowned 17 in the Tamiraparani river in the Manjolai labourers massacre.

In 2018, Edappadi’s AIADMK government opened fire on workers and youth protesting pollution from the Sterlite copper-smelting plant in Thoothukudi, killing 14 in the Thoothukudi Massacre.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the “herd immunity” policies pursued by the bourgeoisie have vastly intensified class tensions internationally and in India. Tamil Nadu has seen the second-worst economic decline of all India’s states during the pandemic.

Last month, AIADMK Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Minister O. Panneerselvam presented an interim budget report for the financial year 2021-22. He noted that Tamil Nadu currently has a debt of Rs 4.85 lakh crore (US\$74.1 billion), which will rise to Rs 5.70 lakh crore (\$87.6 billion) next year. Forty-two thousand crore rupees is being paid as interest on these loans. Further revealing the depth of the financial crisis, the state government is taking new loans to make its interest payments.

Since the BJP took power in 2014 and won re-election in 2019, it has relentlessly attacked the working class, imposing a regressive national tax

system, the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the abrogation of the special status of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, a labour law and a farm law.

The alternative to the “herd immunity” pursued by the capitalist class internationally, and to the anti-worker agenda of the Indian bourgeoisie, is the emerging movement in the Indian and world working class. There have been several waves of strikes in the United States and Europe in the spring and autumn of 2020 against “herd immunity” policies. In India, a powerful movement of strikes by civil servants, mass protests against the anti-Muslim CAA, and of farmers protests against the Modi government has unfolded before and during the pandemic.

Tamil Nadu transport workers have gone on strike for demands including a wage hike that has been delayed for three years and to make contract workers permanent. Many of the retired workers are yet to receive their pensions. There has been widespread outrage at the AIADMK government for spending millions of public funds on upcoming state election advertisements to remain in power while refusing wages and pensions to workers it is condemning to poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the task facing this emerging international movement in the working class is to end the anti-social policies of the capitalist class and take state power around the world in order to wage a scientific fight against the virus. It requires a struggle in the working class to break with the nationalist conceptions promoted by all the bourgeois and Stalinist parties in Tamil Nadu, and the building of a Trotskyist leadership in the working class—the struggle waged across the Indian subcontinent by the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka.



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