

Stalinist-led Kerala government connives with Modi against fishers protesting Adani Port project

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Kerala's Stalinist-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government has openly and firmly joined hands with India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to suppress a months-long agitation by fishers and their families against the ongoing construction of a deep-water transshipment port about 15 kilometers south of the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram (formerly Trivandrum).

The LDF government has given its consent to the deployment of heavily armed Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel at the construction site in order to intimidate and, if necessary, violently suppress any further protests against the project. Since mid-August, work at the multibillion dollar project has largely come to a halt because of the ongoing agitation.

The protesters have highlighted that the port project, which has been under construction since December 2015, is destroying the livelihoods of the 17,000 local residents dependent on the fishery and in multiple ways. Barriers have been erected that impede their small fishing boats from safely sailing to and from the Arabian Sea fishing grounds that they ply. The project is causing massive coastal erosion, forcing many from their seaside homes, and it is destroying the ecosystem on which the fishery depends.

The impoverished protesters have demanded that all construction work on the project be stopped until an expert committee, including at least one community representative, conducts a comprehensive coastal impact study on the planned port.

The port's construction was approved by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's central government and by Kerala's LDF government—a coalition led and dominated by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—without an iota of concern for the destruction of the natural ecosystem and biodiversity. Only a pittance in compensation has been offered to the fishers whose livelihoods are threatened by the port project's adverse environmental impacts and who in some cases have already had to relocate far from the shore because their houses have been destroyed.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, a member of the CPM politburo, has repeatedly denounced the protestors and vowed that the port will be built “no matter what.” Dubbed “the Captain” by an approving corporate media, Vijayan is a keen advocate of “developing” the south Indian state by making it a choice destination for private capital, particularly through the promotion

of “public-private” partnerships.

He and his CPM-led government have given police license to suppress social protests, so as to demonstrate to investors that they will be provided “stability.”

Although Modi and his BJP have repeatedly sought to destabilize the LDF government by whipping up Hindu communalism and instructing the central government-appointed state Governor to obtrusively intervene in the state's affairs, the CPM is eagerly collaborating with it in pushing through the port development project.

This has included organizing joint counter-protests in support of the port project. On November 1, CPM District Secretary Anavoor Nagappan and BJP District President V.V. Rajesh addressed a rally called by the “Save Vizhinjam Port action council” that included thousands of their respective party supporters.

On December 2, the Kerala state government told the Kerala High Court it had no objection to the deployment of the CPRF—a paramilitary force principally used to repress social unrest and mount counter-insurgency operations—at the port construction site. The court sought the government's opinion after the port's developer, Adani Ports, had petitioned the court for “protection” from the protesters and Gautam Adani, the founder and chairman of the Adani Group, had demanded the CPRF's deployment.

With an estimated fortune of \$137 billion, Adani is the wealthiest person in Asia and third richest person in the world. His fortune has grown exponentially in the past two decades, a phenomenon not unrelated to the fact that he enjoys close ties to Modi, who, prior to becoming Indian's prime minister in 2014, was the chief minister of Gujarat for more than a decade. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Adani is Modi's most favoured tycoon.

The CRPF is under the control of Modi's chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah. Like Modi, Shah has a long record of using authoritarian methods to suppress social opposition and inciting violence against Muslims, especially in the state of Gujarat where Modi as Chief Minister helped instigate a horrific anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002.

The Stalinist CPM has for decades functioned as an integral part of the Indian political establishment. Earlier this year, the LDF government announced a new, unabashedly pro-big business economic development plan. Speaking at the UAE-hosted EXPO

2020 in Dubai just before the plan's release, Kerala Chief Minister Vijayan said he "hope(d) that companies and businesses in the UAE would be able to take advantage of the business-friendly environment in Kerala to make our partnership stronger," adding "the Government of Kerala is committed to improving the ease of doing business" in the state.

The LDF's "New Kerala" development plan follows closely the right-wing strategy the CPM pursued in West Bengal, where it led the state government for 34 years from 1977 to 2011.

In 2007, the CPM led Left Front coalition government under the leadership of then West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee tried to seize prime agricultural land from villagers in Singur and Nandigram to give it to Tata Motors, in the first case, and Indonesia-based Salim Group of industries, in the second, provoking mass opposition.

Undeterred, the Bhattacharjee government used police and goon violence in an attempt to impose its authority and seize the land at Nandigram, perpetrating a massacre in which at least 14 died and more than 70 were injured. The Stalinists' actions opened the door for Mamata Banerjee, a right-wing Bengali chauvinist and erstwhile ally of the BJP, to cynically recast herself as the tribune for the poor and West Bengal's largely impoverished Muslim minority.

So discredited were the Stalinists by this wanton bloodletting, their more general pursuit of what Bhattacharjee himself termed "pro-investor policies," and manifest corruption, they were trounced by Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress in the 2011 West Bengal state election. Currently, the CPM does not hold a single seat in the legislative assembly of the state that was for decades their principal electoral bastion.

The "New Kerala" plan calls for the creation of two million jobs over the next five years by attracting "mega-investments" from transnationals and domestic big capital. The transshipment port is viewed by the CPM as a key part of this plan, because its purpose is to make the state a key hub in the global supply chain transport of parts and manufactured goods, competing with the likes of Singapore, Dubai and Colombo in Sri Lanka.

Despite Adani acting as the injured party with his approach to the Kerala High Court for "protection," the real victims are the protesting fishers and their families. Kerala police have unleashed massive violence against the impoverished protestors who are just trying to defend their meagre livelihoods.

The protestors have been falsely blamed for an attack on a police station on November 27 that was in fact perpetrated by goons connected to the ruling parties in New Delhi and Thiruvananthapuram or Adani Ports itself.

The day before, and with the police standing by and refusing to intervene, goons attacked protestors congregated at the port building site with stones, causing injury to many. Subsequently, protestors took the same stones and threw them back at the goons. Despite the protestors pleading with the police to arrest the miscreants, they took no action.

On November 27, the police blamed the Catholic priests leading the protests and the protestors themselves for the "violence" of the previous day, then proceeded to arrest several persons including representatives of the archdiocese. As the news of the arrests

spread, villagers, including women and children, gathered at the Vizhinjam police station to enquire about the whereabouts of those arrested. As darkness fell, in what bears all the hallmarks of a pre-planned coordinated attack, goons linked to the CPM, the BJP or the Adani group attacked police vehicles and the police responded by immediately setting upon the crowd, teargassing and mercilessly beating the peaceful protestors.

Later the police circulated the canard that the protestors had attacked the police station, citing as their evidence the fact that the protestors, who were initially shocked by the unexpected police attack, subsequently sought to defend themselves the best they could.

At least 126 protestors, mostly fishermen and their relatives, were severely injured during the police assault outside the Vizhinjam police station, with many requiring hospitalization.

Police initially filed charges against more than 3,000 protestors for the phony police station attack. These were subsequently suspended or dropped. However, the Bishop of the Archdiocese of Thiruvananthapuram and 15 priests, many of whom were not present at either the Nov. 26 or 27 altercations, continued to face various criminal charges, including in some cases attempted murder.

The CPM government has both backed the police and seized upon the police station "attack" to give its enthusiastic consent to the deployment of the CRPF.

However, till now the CRPF has not been deployed. This is because on Tuesday, Dec. 6, the Catholic Archdiocese suspended the anti-port agitation after talks with the Vijayan government. It did so although the government rejected the fishers' principal demands—that the project be halted until an environmental study is completed and that adequate and continuous support be provided the fishers and their families who have already lost their livelihood.

That the Stalinists are consorting with Modi and his BJP to further the business interests of India's richest billionaire is the most damning self-indictment. That they are doing so in Kerala, where the BJP has spared no effort in whipping up Hindu supremacism, and under conditions where—in the absence of any organized intervention from the working class—the Catholic Church has inserted itself into the leadership of the anti-port agitation, is also extremely communally reckless.



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