

India's ruling far-right BJP makes gains in state elections amid wave of anti-government working class protests

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The results of the five Indian state and territorial assembly elections announced Monday, May 4, point to a deepening crisis of bourgeois rule and the urgency of arming the working class with a revolutionary socialist program and strategy.

Despite mounting social opposition and growing economic distress, India's ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was able to further entrench itself as the dominant party in establishment politics. It won office for the first time ever in West Bengal, India's fourth most populous state, and retained power along with coalition allies in Assam and Puducherry.

In Tamil Nadu, the TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam—Victory to the Tamils Party), which was founded just two years ago by the film star Vijay, finished some 10 seats shy of a parliamentary majority, humbling the DMK and AIADMK, the rival Tamil regionalist parties that have alternated as the state's government since 1967.

In Kerala, a Congress Party-led alliance swept the polls, ousting the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government after two terms in office.

The ruling class lurches still further right

Overall, the election results underscore that the bourgeoisie is lurching ever further rightward. It views the far-right BJP, under the leadership of the would-be "Hindu strongman" Narendra Modi, as the best vehicle to aggressively advance its predatory great-power ambitions on the world stage and intensify worker exploitation at home.

The BJP continues to massively outpace all its electoral rivals combined in fundraising. More importantly, the corporate media and the institutions of the Indian state, including the courts and Election Commission, openly connive in its communalist incitement, violent repression of working class opposition and manipulation of elections through voter suppression. With the complicity of the Supreme Court, the BJP-packed Election Commission arbitrarily removed millions of voters, predominantly poor people and disproportionately Muslims, from the electoral rolls under its highly contested Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

To the delight of Indian and global capital, the Modi government has pushed through two key class war measures in recent months. It has implemented a labour law "reform" that guts restrictions on mass layoffs at large enterprises, promotes the already ubiquitous use of contract labour and greatly restricts workers' right to strike. With the express aim of depressing rural wages, Modi's BJP has also abolished the "rural employment guarantee" (MGNREGA), which for the past two decades

has provided a vital lifeline to tens of millions of destitute rural households.

Two years ago in the elections to the Lok Sabha—India's lower and more powerful house of parliament—the BJP suffered a significant setback. It lost its overall parliamentary majority for the first time since it came to power under Modi in 2014, making it dependent on its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners to pass legislation.

However, the BJP and its NDA allies have since then scored a series of state assembly election victories, including in such major states as Maharashtra, Bihar, Delhi and now West Bengal.

As expected, the BJP and the corporate media are seizing on the results of the April-May state elections to claim Modi enjoys mass support and that the population is increasingly embracing Hindutva, the BJP's fascistic, Hindu supremacist vision of India. Their aim is to intimidate the working class and to cast opposition to the BJP government as "anti-democratic," so as to justify its criminalization and suppression.

The reality is the Modi government sits atop a social volcano, and it well knows it. Hence its constant communalist incitement, targeting religious minorities, especially Muslims; resort to ever more brazen forms of censorship; and repression of working class strikes and protests.

As the election campaign unfolded, mass worker opposition, fueled by the global fuel price surge provoked by the illegal US-Israeli war on Iran, erupted in the form of a wave of strikes and protests in the industrial belts that surround Delhi, India's capital and largest urban agglomeration. At the height of the protests in mid-April, tens of thousands of workers, most of them precariously employed contract workers, were on strike in the Delhi-industrial suburb of Noida, in a movement that emerged outside the control of the Stalinist and other officially recognized trade unions.

The BJP state governments of Uttar Pradesh (where Noida is located), Haryana and Delhi have responded to the worker agitation with violence, smears and frame-ups. Upwards of a thousand workers remain in jail on trumped up charges, as do dozens of labour activists.

The "strength" of the BJP is entirely bound up with the right-wing character of the Congress Party-led opposition and the systematic suppression of the class struggle by the parties and organisations that purportedly speak in its name—above all, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the other Stalinist parliamentary parties and their trade union affiliates.

The debacle of the opposition, above all, the Stalinist CPM

The Congress Party is popularly discredited after first presiding over the

shipwreck of state-led national capitalist development, and then spearheading, from 1991 through 2014, the bourgeoisie's drive to transform India into a cheap-labour production hub for global capital and the forging of an anti-China strategic partnership with US imperialism. Its Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) electoral bloc is a ramshackle coalition that includes the Stalinist parties but is principally comprised of some two-dozen right-wing regional, ethno-chauvinist and casteist parties, many of whom like the fascistic Shiv Sena have previously allied with the BJP.

Although the Congress Party was able to return to power in the south Indian state of Kerala, its all-India reach continues to shrink. It won only 5 seats in Tamil Nadu and just 2 in West Bengal, where, despite contesting all 294 assembly seats, it polled less than 4 percent of the vote. Nationally, the Congress leads the government in just four of India's 28 states and is a junior partner in 2 others; while the BJP governs 16 on its own and 5 with coalition partners.

In the aftermath of the state elections, the INDIA alliance risks unraveling. Two of its regional pillars, the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, fell from office. Moreover, the Congress, in what the defeated DMK Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has characterized as a "backstabbing," "opportunistic" "betrayal," has left its DMK ally in the lurch to support the TVK in forming the state's new government.

The biggest losers in the state elections were the Stalinist CPM and its Left Front allies.

For decades, the Stalinists have functioned as an integral part of the political establishment—subordinating the working class to the big business Congress Party in the name of opposing the far-right BJP; implementing anti-worker, pro-market policies in the states where they have formed the government; and isolating militant worker struggles.

In keeping with this role, the Stalinists, for fear of offending their INDIA alliance allies, did not make an issue of opposition to the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran in their campaign. Nor did they take up the issues of the Gaza genocide, the Indo-US "global strategic partnership" or the Israeli-India alliance, which Modi and Netanyahu enhanced on the very eve of the Iran war. Yet the war is producing growing economic distress for India's workers and toilers; threatens to trigger a global conflagration; and demonstrates, once again, how India's reactionary alliance with US imperialism threatens to produce a catastrophe for the people of South Asia and the world.

In Kerala, the CPM-led LDF lost more than 60 seats, winning 35 seats as compared with 99 in 2021. During its decade in power, the LDF pursued ever more openly right-wing, pro-investor policies, including private-public partnerships, corporate tax concessions and Special Economic Zones, winning praise from corporate circles.

With the defeat of the CPM-led LDF government in Kerala, there is not a single Stalinist-led state government in India for the first time since 1977.

However, the most politically significant and damning result was the debacle the CPM and the Left Front suffered in West Bengal, where the CPM led the government for 34 consecutive years, from 1977 to 2011.

Mamata Banerjee, who founded the TMC and served until last week as West Bengal's chief minister, has accused the BJP—which prior to 2016 had never elected more than one member to the state legislature—of stealing the election. That the BJP mounted a vile and crooked campaign, with only a tiny handful of the 2.3 million people who challenged their exclusion from the voter rolls ultimately allowed to vote, is incontrovertible. But there was also palpable mass opposition to Banerjee and her TMC, which presided over a corrupt, pro-big business government that routinely used violence against its political opponents.

Yet the Stalinists proved utterly incapable of rallying the opposition to Banerjee or, for that matter, winning the support of those who clung to the

TMC in the hopes of preventing the BJP from realizing its long-avowed goal of "conquering" West Bengal—a region that going back to the rise of mass opposition to British colonial rule in the first decade of the 20th century has been considered a bastion of the "left."

The CPM won just 1 seat, and its Left Front allies none. All told, their popular vote increased only fractionally from 2021.

Here is not the place to trace the hemorrhaging of support for the CPM/Left Front in West Bengal. But two points should be made. During the decade prior to its fall from power in 2011, it exposed itself as a pillar of bourgeois rule. At the national level, the Stalinists played a pivotal role in stitching together and propping up the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Under the guise of implementing "reform with a human face," the UPA government pressed forward with pro-investor policies, including corporate tax cuts, privatization, deregulation, and the expansion of contract-labour employment, leading to a massive growth in social inequality. As the Bush administration waged war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the UPA government entered into the "global strategic partnership" with US imperialism, which remains the cornerstone of Indian's foreign policy.

Meanwhile, in West Bengal, the CPL/Left Front government outlawed strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries, closed down or sold off "sick" public sector units, gave handouts to big business in the form of tax concessions and subsidies, and used police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to the expropriation of their lands for Special Economic Zones and other big business projects.

As a result, Banerjee, a notorious anti-communist demagogue and ex-ally of the BJP, was able to posture as "pro-poor."

Second, in what is a measure of just how corrupt and right-wing the CPM in West Bengal had become, starting in the middle of the last decade, a significant part of its patronage-fed party apparatus, including a network of thug enforcers, defected to the Hindu supremacist BJP.

The working class must blaze a new path

A few further observations about the political upheaval in Tamil Nadu are in order. Vijay is a typical movie star cum right-wing capitalist politician of which there are many examples in south India. He and the coterie of erstwhile DMK and AIADMK politicians he has gathered around him were able to exploit growing popular disaffection over mass joblessness and under-employment, the cost-of-living crisis, dilapidated public services and the deep-rooted corruption of the traditional governing parties.

No sooner was Vijay sworn in as chief minister Sunday than he declared that the outgoing DMK government had left the state treasury empty, burdened with an accumulated debt of 10 lakh crore rupees (\$105 billion). Clearly with the intention of repudiating many of his populist election promises, Vijay went on to announce that his TVK government will soon release a white paper detailing the state's financial condition.

One of India's most industrialized states, Tamil Nadu has been the site of numerous militant working class struggles in recent years. Invariably, the CPM-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and CPI-aligned All-India Trades Unions Congress have isolated these struggles and directed the workers to pressure the DMK government to intervene on their behalf, even as it unleashed the police against them. The CPM and CPI have been electoral allies of the DMK for over a decade, boosting its phony claims to be a fighter for "social justice." They contested the just concluded state election alongside the Congress Party as junior partners in the DMK's Secular Progressive Alliance.

Now like their Congress allies, the CPM and CPI have deserted the

DMK and pledged to back the new TVK government, on the claim that otherwise the BJP-aligned AIADMK could potentially form a minority government.

The Stalinists have manifestly led the working class into a blind alley. After three decades in which, in the name of “fighting the BJP,” they have suppressed the class struggle and bound the working class hand and foot to the Congress and other big business parties, the Hindu supremacist far-right is stronger than ever.

The working class must blaze a new path based on the strategy of Permanent Revolution. First elaborated by Leon Trotsky, it animated the October 1917 Russian Revolution and the struggle against its Stalinist degeneration.

The Indian working class must mobilize the rural toilers behind it in a struggle against Indian capitalism and all its political representatives. Only through the establishment of a workers’ government, as part of the development of world socialist revolution, can and will the fundamental social and democratic aspirations of India’s workers and toilers be realized.



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