Why is the Indian and international media elevating Neha Bora? The politically debilitating role of India's Maoist and Stalinist "left"

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Neha Bora, national president of the All India Students' Association (AISA), has been promoted in recent weeks by major Indian and international media outlets as one of the principal figures in youth opposition to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right, authoritarian government.

Reuters, in an October 11 report titled "From theatre to streets, Gen Z protester Neha Bora a new face of India's youth unrest," presented her as a prominent figure in the protests, which have roiled the 12 year-old Modi regime. Al Jazeera subsequently portrayed her as a defiant young leader challenging Modi's government. The *New York Times* headlined its flattering October 15 profile of Bora, "The Tireless Activist Who Became the Face of India's Young Protesters."

The Indian press has similarly promoted the president of the AISA, the student wing of the Maoist Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation. The Hindu website profiled Bora as a prominent and charismatic leader of the youth protests in Delhi that have brought tens of thousands into the streets, in defiance of massive state repression, to protest the Modi government's voter-suppression drive. The *Indian Express* gave its round-up of the Urdu language press in India the prominent headline: "How Neha Bora stands out as a feisty face of Gen Z protesters."

The media elevation of this 29-year old Jawaharlal Nehru University PhD student occurs within a definite political context. The CPI(ML) Liberation, the political parent organization of the AISA, has played a central role in constructing and supporting the Congress Party-led INDIA alliance—a bloc of parliamentary opposition position parties that stretches from a wing of the fascist, Hindutva-ite Shiv Sena to the ostensible "left" parties. The Congress and its INDIA allies aspire to replace Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP at the next elections, slated for 2029, and form a right-wing government no less committed to pro-investor policies and India's anti-China military-strategic partnership with US imperialism.

The promotion of Bora by the media and by the big business Congress Party, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, is taking place within this broader political effort to channel youth opposition behind the INDIA alliance.

The protests that brought Bora to national prominence are rooted in deep-seated anger over the Modi government's increasingly authoritarian methods, mass joblessness among university graduates, and ever widening social inequality.

In October, demonstrations in Delhi demanded the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over his insidious role in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. Launched in late 2025, SIR is a Modi government instigated campaign to strip Muslims, the poor and other sections of the working class hostile to the BJP of their voting rights. It has arbitrarily stripped tens of millions or people from the election rolls.

The Modi government went to extraordinary lengths to try to suppress a protest called by the recently-created Gen Z protest group, the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), for October 10 and supported by the AISA and the Stalinist Left parties. In a mobilization of repressive state power on a scale not seen the 1975-77 Emergency, the authorities mobilized tens of thousands of police and para-militaries, shut down much of the Delhi subway network, and cancelled scores of incoming trains. Bora, leaders of the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP), and thousands of activists from across the country were taken into preventive detention. Nevertheless, tens of thousands took to the streets of India's capital. Protests and solidarity actions also took place in other cities.

The events immediately following this state crackdown, which the *World Socialist Web Site* described as "a major step toward consolidating a dictatorial regime," were decisive in Bora's sudden rise to national political prominence.

On October 12, Bora appeared alongside Rahul Gandhi and his sister, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, also a first-rank Congress Party leader, in a Congress-led march to the Supreme Court. The *Indian Express* reported on October 15 that Bora marching alongside the Congress leadership had generated discussion within the party, including concern among sections of its student wing. Its report, "Neha Bora finds place at big table, Congress leaders wonder if pie shrinking," further underscored, if any proof was needed, that the decision of Gandhi and Vadra to associate with the "radical" student leader Bora was highly calculated and that the widely-disseminated media images of them walking arm-in-arm was the desired outcome.

The images of the AISA president marching alongside the Congress's dynastic leaders served the precise purpose for which they were staged: to present the INDIA alliance as the natural political destination for youth opposition to Modi. The media elevation of Bora was the product of a deliberate political operation to harness the youth opposition movement to the bourgeois opposition to Modi and the politics of the Indian capitalist establishment.

Of course, Bora and her mentors in the CPI(ML) Liberation were themselves eager participants in this reactionary maneuver.

Like its Left Front allies—the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—the CPI(ML) Liberation points to the rise of the Hindu supremacist BJP and the authoritarian actions of the Modi government not to summon the working class to struggle against Indian capitalism, but to chain popular opposition

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to the parties and institutions of India's capitalist oligarchy.

The CPI(ML) Liberation defends the legacy of the pre-1947 CPI, which subordinated the working class to the Gandhi-Nehru-led Indian National Congress, assisting it in aborting the mass anti-imperialist movement and negotiating a transfer of power in which the bourgeoisie gained control of the British colonial state apparatus and the subcontinent was partitioned along communal lines. It traces its political origins to the Maoist-led Naxalite movement. Beginning in 1967, the Naxalites sought to incite a peasant-based "protracted people's war," turning tens of thousands of youth influenced by Marxism away from a working class engaged in increasingly militant struggles and reinforcing, thereby, the political stranglehold of the establishment-aligned CPI and CPM.

After the Naxalite movement was isolated and brutally crushed by the Indian state, sections of the Maoists chose to enter the "political mainstream." The CPI(ML) Liberation is the largest of the protest and parliamentary offshoots of Indian Maoism. In recent decades, it has associated itself ever more closely with the CPM-led Left Front, which has suffered repeated electoral debacles after propping up a series of right-wing Congress-led governments at the Centre and imposed, what it itself terms, "pro-investor" policies when leading state governments.

The CPI(ML) Liberation's participation in the INDIA alliance represents the culmination of this right-wing evolution.

Its response to the October 10 state mobilization was not to direct the AISA to turn to the working class, which in India as around the world is being drawn into increasingly militant struggle, and fight to mobilize it as an independent political force. Rather it redoubled its efforts to tie the youth protests to the Congress Party and the political establishment, while confining the struggles of the working class to collective bargaining disputes under a legal regime every more blatantly skewed in favour of the employers.

The CPI(ML) Liberation has long been integrated into the parliamentary opposition's efforts to assemble a coalition against the BJP. Its political role was especially evident in the preparations for the 2024 general election. In February 2023, the CPI(ML) Liberation organized on the sidelines of its party congress a "Save Democracy, Save India" rally in Patna, the capital of the eastern Indian state of Bihar. The rally brought together prominent opposition figures, including CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and senior Congress leader Salman Khurshid, with the aim of initiating discussions on a "broad" anti-BJP opposition alliance in preparation for the 2024 election. Ultimately this would lead to the formal establishment of the INDIA alliance later that year.

If the CPI(ML) Liberation party congress was seen as an important venue for such discussions, it was because of its ties to both the Congress Party and Bihar Chief Minister and Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar.

Nitish Kumar had left the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in August 2022. In June 2023, he convened the first meeting of the emerging INDIA alliance in Patna. The CPI(ML) Liberation played an important role in promoting Kumar and his JD (U), which have loyally partnered with the far-right BJP over decades, as an ally of the big business Congress Party.

While Kumar ultimately reneged on his deal with the INDIA alliance, the CPI(ML) Liberation was accepted as a founding member and campaigned for its candidates in the 2024 general election. Its election charter carried the slogan "Defeat BJP, Save Democracy! Vote for CPI(ML), Elect INDIA candidates." The party urged voters to support Congress and other alliance candidates, including the Uddhav Thackeray faction of the fascist Shiv Sena party in Maharashtra and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal.

The political character of this alliance was examined in two articles on the WSWS. These demonstrated that the INDIA alliance is a right-wing political trap, comprised of parties that for decades have faithfully implemented the agenda of the ruling class from austerity, privatisation and the promotion of precarious contract labour, to the build-up of India's military. The Stalinist CPI and CPM, alongside the Maoist CPI(ML) Liberation, have sought to present this coalition as a "democratic" and "progressive" alternative.

Bora's elevation as the face of the protest movement has to some degree come at the expense of the CJP leadership. The latter have themselves oriented to the political establishment, and are no less hostile to a turn to the working class and to linking the fight to defend democratic rights with a working class counter-offensive against austerity, contract labour, social inequality and capitalist oligarchy. But they do not have the same longstanding political and organisational ties to the capitalist establishment.

Bora's standing has also benefited from her apparent greater readiness to challenge the government's patently anti-democratic attempts to illegalize the student protests.

The CJP largely initiated the protests demanding the Election Commissioner's resignation, and its founder Abhijeet Dipke and convenors Saurav Das and Ashutosh Ranka were among the figures detained ahead of the October 10 protest.

After their detention on October 10, Dipke, Das and Ranka ended up signing "peace bonds," committing to maintain "peace and good behaviour" for one year. As a result, the CJP leadership has been politically muzzled and is threatened with arrest and imprisonment if they call for demonstrations in defiance of government attempts to ban them.

Bora, by contrast, refused to sign such bonds and challenged the magistrate's notice issued against her. Under Section 126 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (Indian Citizen Protection Code), the police have been granted draconian powers to carry out preventive arrests for disturbing "public tranquility." The differing responses of the CJP leaders and Bora have further contributed to the latter's prominence in media coverage.

But Bora's refusal to sign the peace bond, however courageous, has not been directed toward building an independent movement of the working class. It has instead been used to channel the youth protests into the arms of the Congress Party, with the full-throated approval of the CPI(ML) Liberation.

The Modi government's repression of Bora and other protesters must be opposed. The right to organise, assemble and demonstrate against government policy is a basic democratic right. But the defence of these rights requires the youth to turn towards the working class to develop a movement for international socialism.

The working class and youth in India confront the task of developing an independent political movement against communal reaction, authoritarianism and capitalist exploitation. This requires breaking from the parliamentary parties and their Stalinist allies, who subordinate the struggles of workers and young people to electoral calculations and the interests of the ruling class. The defence of democratic rights must be connected to the fight for social equality, against imperialist war and against the capitalist system itself. Only through the independent political mobilisation of the working class, uniting workers across religious, caste and regional divisions and rallying the rural poor behind it, in the struggle for workers' power and socialism, can a genuine alternative be developed.

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