

In wake of Nandigram massacre

West Bengal's Stalinist chief minister invited to Washington

By Arun Kumar and Kranti Kumara
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In what constitutes a resounding vote of confidence in the pro-investor policies of West Bengal's Left Front government, the Bush administration has invited Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the state's chief minister and a politburo member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), to visit the US.

United States Trade Representative Susan Schwab issued the public invitation to Bhattacharjee April 14, after she and a high-level US business delegation had discussed trade and investment with the chief minister at his office in the state capital, Kolkata (Calcutta).

After noting that Bhattacharjee has already been invited to the US "by many US-based companies," Schwab declared, "Today I add my voice to these invitations. We would like to hear about the political and development aspects of *his success*" (emphasis added).

The US invitation came exactly one month to the day after security forces, acting on orders from West Bengal's CPM-led Left Front government, killed 14 peasants and wounded more than 70 in Nandigram. A rural area 150 km from Kolkata, Nandigram had been convulsed for months by protests against the state government's plans to expropriate 10,000 acres of land for a Special Economic Zone to be operated by the Indonesian-based Salim Group.

In the name of reasserting government authority in the area, the Left Front government mobilized more than 4,000 heavily-clad security forces to storm Nandigram. It has subsequently attempted to justify the massacre by claiming that the police opened fire in self-defence. But this is belied by eyewitness accounts, as well as by the fact that not a single policeman suffered serious injury.

The wanton massacre of peasants seeking to stop their means of livelihood from being taken from them by a government acting on behalf of a transnational corporation has provoked a storm of outrage across India.

But the Left Front government has vowed that it will press forward with its "industrialization" policy—that is with making West Bengal a magnet for Indian and international capital seeking cheap labour and a pro-investor tax and regulatory regime. A meeting earlier this month of the Central Committee

of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Stalinist party that is the dominant partner in the Left Front alliance, defended the police action in Nandigram and dismissed the peasant agitation as "a political gang-up of the Trinamul Congress [a regional ally of the Hindu supremacist BJP] with the most disruptive elements like the SUCI [Socialist Unity Centre of India], Naxalites and Maoists."

Clearly the Stalinists' ruthlessness in enforcing the wishes of capital has convinced the Bush administration, if it had any residual doubts, that the West Bengal Left Front government and the CPM are deadly earnest in their self-proclaimed aim of making West Bengal "investor friendly"—that theirs is a regime with which the US can and should do business.

In tandem with India's ruling elite, the CPM and the Left Front have since 1991 supported, in West Bengal and nationally, the drive to privatize, deregulate, reduce agricultural price-supports, and dismantle public services and social programs, so as to attract foreign capital and promote export-led growth.

Since May 2004, the Left Front has provided India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition—a government committed to neo-liberal "reform" and a "strategic partnership" with the US—with the parliamentary votes needed to sustain it in office.

But the West Bengal government and CPM have become much more assiduous in their courting of capital over the past 18 months. The Left Front made its "industrialization policy" the centrepiece of its campaign to win re-election in the May 2006 West Bengal state election and CPM leaders openly boasted that for the first time their party was seeking to win support from all classes.

Prior to unleashing the police on the peasants of Nandigram, the Left Front government invoked draconian colonial-era laws late last year to expropriate 1,000 acres for a Tata Motors car plant in Singur and to outlaw any protests in the area.

According to news reports, Bhattacharjee has been angling for an official invitation to the US for months, so that he can sell in person the benefits of West Bengal to the US corporate elite.

On March 7, the US Consul General in Kolkata, Henry V. Jardine, gave a speech to the Indo-US Business Council, entitled “An assessment of West Bengal’s economic and Business conditions.” After referring to various “positive” economic indicators and praising the West Bengal government for its business-friendly demeanour, Jardine said, “If the present pattern continues, I would anticipate greater US investment and commerce contributing to a rapidly growing economy in West Bengal.”

Jardine made an explicit reference to the Left Front government’s recent policy shifts, declaring, “Officials in West Bengal have only in recent years gone from castigating the private sector to embracing it—or at least accepting it in the spirit of Deng Xiaoping’s often repeated line, ‘It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice’.”

The citation from Deng Xiaoping, the architect of the Chinese Stalinist government’s “open door” to capital, was no chance remark. The CPM leadership extols China, where workers slave on behalf of Chinese entrepreneurs and transnational corporations in conditions like those of Industrial Revolution England and the majority of the population lacks access to proper healthcare, as “socialist” and proclaims China as the “model” for its current drive to industrialize West Bengal.

Jardine and the Bush administration expect that the West Bengal government will not only emulate the Chinese Communist Party regime in establishing special economic zones where normal taxes and regulations are waived, but also in savagely suppressing working class discontent.

In keeping with the Chinese model, Bhattacharjee has become ever more aggressive in his attempt to stamp out West Bengal’s tradition of worker militancy. West Bengal was the first state to effectively outlaw strikes in information technology and information technology-enabled (business processing) industries. In September 2005, after a one-day general strike against the UPA government’s right-wing economic policies had disrupted these sectors, Bhattacharjee pledged to a meeting of business leaders that his government would ensure no such disruptions happen even again: “This menace [of strikes] is known to me. I can assure you that the strongest action will be taken against such perpetrators in the future. I will deal with the matter at the administrative and political level.” (See “Indian Stalinists pledge to stamp out further IT work disruptions”)

Bhattacharjee and the CPM leadership have brought increasing pressure on the CPM-affiliated Congress of Industrial Trade Unions (CITU) to prevent strikes and otherwise smother worker unrest.

On March 13, when workers at the Uttarapara plant of Hindustan Motors went on strike to protest the dismissal of 15 workers and the non-payment of two months of wages, the CITU opposed the action. Echoing Bhattacharjee’s line, CITU union leader Santasri Chatterjee declared, “It will not be right

to stop production at the plant at the moment. It is more important to get two months’ salary through discussion and not through strike.”

The opposition of the CITU has not only been verbal. On March 28 the CITU organized a group of workers to force their way through the picket lines being maintained by workers belonging to two rival unions. Once inside the factory gates the CITU-led group turned around and attacked the strikers with bottles and bricks.

According to the *Statesmen*, police and CITU goons attacked striking workers at the Ganges jute mill in Hooghly, a suburb of Kolkata, on April 15.

The Left Front, especially the CPM, have made much of their opposition to US imperialism and the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

In November 2005 they organized massive protests in West Bengal against a joint Indian-US military exercise. Only later did it become public knowledge that Bhattacharjee had provided private assurances to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that his state administration would ensure that the exercise was not in any way impeded.

When US President Bush visited India in March 2006, the Stalinists similarly organized mass protests. They have been very critical of the Indo-US nuclear accord that Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh finalized during Bush’s visit, warning that through the accord Washington is trying to ensnare India in a dependent relationship.

The Stalinists’ “anti-US” rhetoric serves two functions. First, it gives backing to that section of the Indian ruling elite that calculates India’s geopolitical interests will be better served by staying clear of entanglements with an aggressive and declining US. Second, it serves as a political cover—cover for the CPM’s and Left Front’s continued support for an Indian government led by the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie’s traditional governing party, which is pursuing both a socially incendiary socioeconomic agenda and a strategic partnership with Washington, and for the West Bengal government’s own pro-investor agenda.

The Bush administration is hardly renowned for the subtlety of its political analysis. But with the Left Front government shooting down peasants on behalf of capital, even it has been able to take the measure of the CPM’s “anti-US” rhetoric.

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