

Communist Party of India (Marxist): a key prop of Indian bourgeois rule

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Two days before the final stage of India's five-phase, month-long general election we interviewed Communist Party of India (Marxist) Central Committee member A.K. Padmanabhan.

He unabashedly defended the record and perspective of the CPM and the Left Front, the multi-party electoral alliance it leads. This included the CPM's propping up of the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government for four years; its current efforts to promote a "Third Front" comprised of rightwing regional and caste-based parties as the basis of an alternative "secular" and "pro-people" government; the pro-investor "industrialization" policy pursued by West Bengal's Left Front government; and its insistence, under conditions of the greatest capitalist crisis since the Great Depression, that socialism is off the historical agenda—is, to use the words of CPM senior statesman Jyoti Basu, "a far off cry." (For the interview transcript see "Indian Stalinist leader defends alliances with Congress and rightwing regional parties".)

Behind a façade of "revolutionary" ritual—red flags, hammers and sickles, portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Che Guevara—the CPM functions as an integral party of the Indian bourgeois political establishment, working to divert and derail the opposition of the working class and India's toilers to the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to make India a magnet for foreign investment and a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism.

Speaking on behalf of the CPM, Padmanabhan claims that "for 20 years we have been fighting liberalization policies, so-called globalization policies." This is a lie. With their parliamentary votes the CPM and the Left Front helped sustain in office the Narasimha Rao minority Congress government (1991-96) that initiated the Indian bourgeoisie's "new economic policy" of privatization, deregulation, tax cuts for big business, the paring back of agricultural price supports, and other pro-investor policies. The Stalinists played an even more direct role in sustaining and indeed formulating the policies of the 1996-98 United Front government and the Congress Party-led UPA government, both of which pressed forward with neo-liberal reforms.

In those states where they have held office, West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura, the CPM and its Left Front allies have directly implemented the bourgeoisie's restructuring program. To woo domestic and foreign investors, West Bengal's Left Front government has banned strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries, offered tax concessions, slashed social spending, and used police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to its program of expropriating land for special economic zones.

These rightwing policies have created conditions in which the anti-communist demagogue and erstwhile ally of the Hindu chauvinist

BJP Mamata Bannerjee and her Trinamul Congress have been able to posture, with some success, as defenders of the poor.

The CPM has sought to slow or prevent the opening of some sectors of the economy to international capital and the wholesale privatization of profitable Public Sector Units. But it does so not from the standpoint of developing a working class-led mass movement against capitalism, but rather to defend weaker sections of Indian capital and to ensure the Indian bourgeois state retains some leverage to offset the pressure and power of foreign capital.

Similarly, the Stalinists' call for an "independent foreign policy" has nothing to do with a genuine anti-imperialist policy based on the mobilization of the international working class against imperialism. The CPM promotes an alternative foreign policy for the Indian bourgeoisie, based on "multilateralism," the United Nations, and closer ties with China and Russia, arguing that bourgeois India will be impeded in asserting its own interests if tied too closely to the US.

The CPM has justified its support for a series of rightwing governments in New Delhi, including the UPA, on the grounds that this is the only means to oppose the Hindu supremacist BJP from coming to power.

But the emergence of the BJP and a host of caste-based parties as major players in Indian politics beginning during the 1980s was itself a product of the Stalinists' decades' long policy of subordinating the working class to one or another bourgeois party, whilst containing the working class within the narrow framework of militant trade union struggles.

In the 1960s and 1970s, under conditions of growing world capitalist crisis, India was convulsed by a wave of worker and peasant struggles. The Stalinists insisted, however, that there was no prospect of the working class mounting a challenge to the Indian bourgeoisie, which in a quarter-century of independent rule had proven its organic incapacity to resolve the basic tasks of the democratic revolution, including the eradication of landlordism and casteism. In keeping with the Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution—the CPM's variant of which is called the Peoples Democratic Revolution—the Stalinists argued that the working class must lend support to the purported progressive, anti-imperialist wing of the bourgeoisie in consolidating India's national capitalist development. For the Communist Party of India, this was the Congress Party and Indira Gandhi. For the CPM, which broke from CPI in 1964, this was the Janata Party, one of whose principal components was the Jana Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP. And where the Stalinists were propelled into office by the mass upsurge, as Padmanabhan himself concedes, they faithfully worked within the existing legal-constitutional framework, administering capitalist rule.

Ultimately, through a combination of repression (Indira Gandhi's Emergency) and concessions (such as the land reform enacted by West Bengal's Left Front government), the bourgeoisie was able to beat back the mass upsurge and stabilize its rule. Because the working class had been prevented by the Stalinists from advancing its own solution to the manifest failure of the bourgeoisie's post-independence national development strategy (so-called Congress socialism) to resolve the basic problems of the masses, various rightwing caste and communal parties were able to manipulate and deflect the popular anger and frustration over mass poverty, increasing social inequality, and caste oppression.

The rise of the BJP is a measure of the depth of the social crisis and the deformed character of Indian bourgeois democracy—a democracy born of the abortion of the anti-imperialist struggle and the communal partition of South Asia—and the urgency, therefore, of the independent political mobilization of the working class.

But for the Stalinists, the BJP's rise has served as pretext to lurch still further right and integrate themselves still more deeply into the politics of the Indian establishment.

From the UPA to the Third Front

The Stalinists' role in suppressing the class struggle is exemplified by their actions during the past five years.

The 2004 elections demonstrated, albeit through the distorted prism of official politics, the mass popular opposition to the Indian bourgeoisie's socio-economic agenda. While the Congress was catapulted into first place on the basis of its call for "reforms, but with a human face," the Left Front recorded its best-ever election result, winning seats mainly at the expense of the Congress.

To underline the Congress' intention to carry out the diktats of big business, Sonia Gandhi quickly named Manmohan Singh, who as finance minister in the early 1990s had spearheaded the "reforms," to be prime minister. The CPM, meanwhile, took the lead in rallying third party support for a Congress-led government and co-authored the United Progressive Alliance's Common Minimum Programme—a document based on the lie that it is possible to reconcile the bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap-labor haven for world capitalist production and the aspirations and needs of India's toilers.

Predictably, within a matter of months the Stalinists were forced to acknowledge that the UPA government they were propping up in parliament was pursuing policies, including forging a strategic partnership with US imperialism, little different from those of the BJP-led government that preceded it.

Padmanabhan claims that the CPM "broke with the Congress and UPA at the correct time." In fact, it was the Congress that effectively kicked the Left Front out of the government.

The CPM repeatedly pledged to provide India with stable government, guaranteeing to support the UPA for its full five-year term on the sole condition that the UPA not implement the civilian nuclear treaty it had negotiated with the US. For well over a year, the Congress maneuvered, getting the Stalinists to acquiesce to various steps that brought the nuclear treaty closer to implementation, then at a time of its own choosing forced the issue.

Its partnership with the Congress having ended with its ally cementing the Indo-US "strategic" alliance that had been a pivotal objective of the Indian bourgeoisie for a decade or more, the Stalinists hastened to embark on another reactionary, bankrupt parliamentary maneuver. They cobbled together an "anti-BJP, anti-Congress" Third Front comprised of various state and caste-based parties—all of them

former allies of the BJP and Congress and all of them with lengthy rightwing records—and claimed that this could provide the basis for "a secular, pro-people government."

Padmanabhan cannot deny the reactionary records of the Stalinists' Third Front allies. AIADMK head Jayalalithaa is rightly hated by workers in Tamil Nadu for having used police violence, strike breakers, and mass firings to break a 2003 government workers strike. TDP head Chandrababu Naidu was a poster boy for the World Bank. Yet Padmanabhan argues that Jayalalithaa and Naidu have "learned" from their experiences and should be taken at their word when they claim to oppose the policies of the Congress and BJP. Absent is even the hint of a Marxist class analysis. What Padmanabhan calls "democratic forces" are in fact bourgeois parties that promote the interests of various regional factions of the Indian bourgeoisie and manipulate ethno-linguistic and caste identities to rally popular support.

The Third Front was a political abomination, an ad hoc grouping of regional bourgeois parties pursuing what they perceived to be the main chance. It failed to produce a manifesto or any policy document whatsoever and even before the elections were over many of its constituents were involved in backroom bargaining with the Congress and/or BJP.

As for the CPM and the Left Front, they too were preparing to maneuver with the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government. The entire scheme of a Third Front government was predicated on the elections resulting in a weakened Congress Party that would decide that it was in its interests to provide "outside" support to a government formed by various regional parties and the Stalinists rather than allow the BJP-led NDA to return to power. And the CPM and CPI leaders were careful not to entirely shut the door on their supporting a Congress-led government in the name of blocking the BJP. When asked if the Left Front excluded parliamentary support to the Congress, CPM Politburo member Sitaram Yechury declared, "We do not think the need to support a Congress-led government will arise."

The CPM and its Left Front serve to systematically promote illusions in the parties of the Indian bourgeoisie and disrupt and suppress the resistance of the working class, when not themselves actively implementing the bourgeoisie's program as in Kerala and West Bengal.

The time is long overdue for socialist minded workers, students and intellectuals in India to turn to the revolutionary heritage of Trotskyism and to begin the struggle to build a new revolutionary socialist party of the Indian working class based on the strategy of permanent revolution. To liquidate landlordism, casteism and the entire legacy of feudal backwardness and imperialist oppression that continues to blight India's development, the working class must lead the toilers in revolutionary opposition to bourgeois rule and as part of the socialist struggle of workers around the world.

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