

India: CPM General-Secretary Sitaram Yechury's right-wing record

By Arun Kumar
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Sitaram Yechury, the newly-elected general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, personifies the further lurch right that India's main Stalinist parliamentary effected at its recently concluded 21st congress.

The congress formally reaffirmed the "political-tactical" line the CPM has pursued over the past quarter century, i.e. providing pivotal support to the Indian bourgeoisie in its drive to make India a cheap-labor producer for global capital. And it did so under conditions where the Indian elite has brought the Hindu supremacist BJP to power to dramatically intensify the assault on the working class and steer New Delhi even more fully into the strategic orbit of an ever-more bellicose Washington

By reaffirming a policy that has seen them support a succession of Indian governments committed to neo-liberal restructuring, most of them Congress Party-led, the Stalinists have made clear that in response to the intensification of class conflict they intend to redouble their efforts to politically shackle the working class to the big business Congress Party and various right-wing regional and caste-ist parties. (See: Indian Stalinists reaffirm right-wing "political-tactical" line)

The 62 year-old Yechury has played a pivotal role in the CPM's intimate and politically sordid dealings with India's political establishment, particularly since 2005, when he became a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the national parliament.

Yechury has long had close ties with the leadership of the CPM's West Bengal unit. He was elected to the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal and was strongly supported by the state CPM unit in his bid to become party leader. Both Yechury and the West Bengal party leadership favor the resumption of close ties with Congress. By contrast, the outgoing general-secretary, Prakash Karat, advocated a policy of "equidistance from the BJP and Congress" and an orientation to electoral and governmental alliances with regional parties like the AIADMK, BJD and JD (U).

The CPM ruled West Bengal for 34 years ending in 2011 and it is there that it has most openly pursued capitalist restructuring. Implementing what it itself termed "pro-investor" policies, the CPM-led government in West Bengal slashed social spending to fund tax concessions to big

business, outlawed strikes by workers in the IT and IT-enabled sector, and used police and goon violence to crush peasant opposition to land expropriations for big business projects.

Yechury hails from the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. He became a member of the Stalinist-led Students' Federation of India (SFI) in 1974, while a graduate student at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. The following year he joined the CPM and, after a stint as head of the JNU student union, was elected national president of the SFI in 1978

Yechury entered the CPM in period when the working class in India, as around the world, was on the offensive, mounting mass struggles which shook the world capitalist order. The CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI), from which it had split in 1964, worked systematically to confine this working class upsurge to trade union collective-bargaining struggles and to politically subordinate it to rival wings of the bourgeois establishment.

The CPI supported Indira Gandhi's Congress Party government, claiming it represented the "progressive," "anti-feudal" and "anti-imperialist" wing of the bourgeoisie. It continued to do so even as Gandhi smashed the 1974 railway strike, jailing thousands of workers, and from June 1975 to March 1977, imposed the authoritarian "Emergency", under which basic civil liberties were suspended and tens of thousands of government opponents jailed.

The CPM, meanwhile, worked to politically tie the working class to Gandhi's bourgeois opponents. In the name of "fighting Congress emergency rule" it promoted the Janata Party, an ad hoc coalition of Gandhi's bourgeois political opponents, one of whose principal components was the Jana Sangh, the BJP's predecessor.

Yechury was elected to the CPM central committee in 1984 and nearly a decade later to the party's Politburo.

An *Economic Times* article observes with appreciation Yechury's ability to collaborate with all factions of Indian's political elite. "Yechury," it declares, "is a warm, affable, networker who has friends in all parties and has worked closely with leaders of all non-BJP parties." These qualities proved particularly important for the bourgeoisie during the period from May 2004 through June 2008, when the CPM-led Left Front was the principal parliamentary prop of the Congress-led

United Progressive Alliance government. Yechury was the senior CPM member on the UPA-Left Front Co-ordination Committee, which formalized the working relationship between the government and the CPM-led Left Front.

The article adds: “As former [CPM] general secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet’s understudy, Yechury worked with P. Chidambaram to draft the common minimum program for the United Front government in 1996 and had actively pursued the coalition-building process during the formation of the [Congress-led] UPA government in 2004.”

The reference to 2004 is to the pivotal role that the CPM played in creating the UPA. Following the May 2004 general election, which unexpectedly saw the BJP reduced to second place in the Lok Sabha, the CPM worked tirelessly to corral various regional parties into pledging their support for a Congress-led government and then formally allying with it in the UPA so as to better ensure the new government’s stability.

In “coalition-building”—that is helping stitch together a viable government for the bourgeoisie—Yechury was following in the footsteps of his mentor, Surjeet.

Like Yechury in 2004, Surjeet was instrumental after the 1996 election in bringing together various regional and caste-based parties in a United Front government, which the Congress supported from the “outside”. For the better part of the next two years, Surjeet played the role of political fireman, repeatedly intervening to mediate disputes between the rival party leaders so as to keep this ramshackle coalition going

Yechury’s collaboration with Chidambaram in drafting the United Front government’s program is especially noteworthy, since Chidambaram, serving as its Finance Minister, continued and significantly expanded the “new economic policy”—i.e. neo-liberal reforms—initiated by the Narasimha Rao Congress government of 1991-96.

The *Deccan Herald* in an April 21 editorial paid tribute to Yechury’s role in the politics of the Indian establishment, while suggesting the CPM should work even more closely with the BJP’s electoral rivals so as to neuter the inevitable widespread popular opposition to India’s new right-wing government. “Yechury, as the protégé of the redoubtable Harkishan Singh Surjeet, has a reputation for being pragmatic and flexible,” declared the *Herald*.

In an obituary for Surjeet that Yechury penned for the CPM’s English weekly *People’s Democracy* in 2008, the CPM’s new general-secretary himself talked about the “important role” the CPM-led Left Front has played in propping up the crisis-ridden Indian bourgeois rule by helping form and support a series of national or Union governments: “Soon after the defeat of the Emergency in India, CPI(M) realised that the days of single-party rule were over. And in the possible coalitions that were to emerge, the Left needed to position itself and play an important role, to help steer the course of Indian politics.”

Yechury then praises Surjeet for having helped forge the

CPM’s alliances with various bourgeois parties to secure capitalist rule against the working class and rural toilers: “All the combinations that Comrade Surjeet helped forge had this singular aim, to defend and strengthen India’s plurality. It was his spontaneous offer to support the VP Singh government [in 1989] from outside that forced the BJP to do likewise, and not join it.”

Yechury has also worked closely with the Indian government and state in securing the Indian bourgeoisie’s geo-political interests in the region. In 2006, he acted as a point man for the Congress-led UPA government in its efforts to shore up bourgeois rule in neighboring Nepal, which had been thrown into an unprecedented crisis by the eruption of mass protests in Katmandu and other urban centres against the authoritarian regime of King Gyanendra and by a Maoist insurgency in the countryside.

Acting as a semi-official government emissary, Yechury twice visited Nepal in March-April 2006 to help broker a political settlement in which the Maoists ended their insurgency and were incorporated into official bourgeois politics.

India has traditionally viewed landlocked Nepal as part of its regional sphere of dominance and was concerned that the political crisis there could strengthen its rival China. But it also feared that the growing Maoist insurgency in Nepal could impact on India, where Maoists or Naxalites have drawn support from tribal peoples whom the Indian state has systematically ignored and abused.

In explaining his role in Nepal, Yechury openly boasted that it would further the India state’s anti-Maoist counter-insurgency campaign. “Drawing the [Nepalese] Maoists into the democratic mainstream,” Yechury told the *Indian Express*, “is the biggest advantage that India will have in tackling its own internal Maoist problem.” (See: Indian Stalinists take leading role in New Delhi’s efforts to contain Nepal crisis)

Yechury’s role in Nepal further exposes the bogus character of the CPM’s “anti-imperialist” rhetoric. The stabilization of bourgeois rule in the Himalayan kingdom and the restriction of Chinese influence was very much in the interests of US imperialism, with which India was in 2006 openly seeking to cement a “global strategic partnership.”

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