

Indian Stalinists at loggerheads over what right-wing course to follow

By Deepal Jayasekera and Keith Jones
18 April 2018

India's principal Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), enters its triennial congress, which begins today in Hyderabad, deeply divided.

From the standpoint of the interests of the working class, the differences are inconsequential. They revolve around which of two right-wing political courses to follow—specifically how overtly to align with the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government.

Like ruling elites around the world, the Indian bourgeoisie is hurtling to the right, embracing reaction, militarism, and authoritarian methods of rule.

In 2014 it brought Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power to intensify anti-worker neoliberal reform and more aggressively pursue its great power ambitions on the world stage.

To enthusiastic applause from big business, the BJP government has slashed social spending, ramped up disinvestment (privatization), gutted environmental and labour regulations, and transformed India into a frontline state in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China, while stoking Hindu communalist reaction.

Four years on, there is a groundswell of worker and toiler opposition to the government and more broadly to mass joblessness, chronic poverty, and rampant social inequality—that is to say, to the catastrophic outcome of more than a quarter-century of “pro-investor” reform.

The Stalinists have responded to this intensification of class struggle by redoubling their efforts to harness the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie and to the state, claiming that the courts and other parts of the apparatus of capitalist repression can be bulwarks in the fight against communal reaction.

One faction, led by party General Secretary Sitaram Yechury, favours an “understanding” with the Congress for the 2019 elections, as well as explicit alliances with various casteist and regional parties, including erstwhile BJP allies.

The rival faction—headed by Yechury's predecessor, Prakash Karat—agrees that the “main task is to defeat the BJP” government by “rallying all the secular and democratic forces,” including what it characterizes as the “regional bourgeois parties.” But it opposes any pre-poll “understanding or

electoral alliance” with the Congress Party.

The Indian media is portraying Karat as the leader of a resolutely “anti-Congress” faction. But this is far from the mark. If needed to prevent the BJP from returning to office, it would favour, once the votes have been counted, the CPM supporting a Congress-led government, just as the CPM did during the first three years Karat was party general-secretary.

Nor, as Karat and his supporters have made clear, are they opposed to the CPM striking electoral alliances with parties, like the DMK in Tamil Nadu, that are themselves in an electoral bloc with the Congress, so long as the CPM is itself not formally tied to the Congress Party.

Just how narrow are the differences between the two factions was exemplified by an editorial Karat wrote for the March 25th issue of the CPM's English-language weekly, *People's Democracy*. It effectively called for an “Anybody but BJP” electoral strategy, in which the CPM would “help to maximize the pooling of the anti-BJP votes,” by supporting whichever opposition party in a given state is best able to defeat the BJP and its electoral allies. While repeating his opposition to an electoral “alliance or understanding” with the “neoliberal” Congress, Karat made clear that the CPM's policy of “pooling votes” would also apply to the Congress in those states where it is the strongest opposition party.

A few days later, the CPM's Central Committee put a version of this into practice. It urged voters in Congress-ruled Karnataka to support whichever candidate in a given electoral district is most likely to prevail over the BJP candidate in the state elections to be held May 12.

While the CPM waves red flags and on occasion declaims about a “socialist” future, it has functioned for decades as an integral part of the Indian political establishment.

For a two-decade period, from 1989 to 2008, the CPM and its Left Front propped up a series of right-wing Indian governments, most of them Congress led. With the shipwreck of the Indian bourgeoisie's post-independence state-led development project, these governments, beginning in 1991, implemented the new agenda of the Indian bourgeoisie, transforming India into a cheap-labour haven for global capital and pursuing ever-closer relations with Washington.

Both factions defend this record, as well as the imposition of

what they frankly term “pro-investor” policies in the three states where the CPM has held office over the past quarter century: West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura.

They also have no differences over the CPM’s support for the great power ambitions of the Indian ruling class, including the massive expansion of India’s military might since the turn of the century, through the development of a blue-water navy and a nuclear triad.

And the Yechury and Karat factions are united in promoting a phony anti-imperialism. To the Indian bourgeoisie’s military-strategic partnership with Washington and the ever-growing danger of war, they counterpose not the development of a global socialist anti-war movement, but the call for a “multilateral world order” and for the Indian elite to assert its “strategic autonomy” so it can more freely pursue its own predatory interests.

Nonetheless, the two factions have long been at loggerheads. Indeed, so bitterly have they been divided that on several occasions over the past two years it has been impossible to rule out an impending split.

In January, Yechury tendered his resignation as party head after the Central Committee rejected his draft of the main political resolution to be placed before this week’s party congress and adopted the resolution submitted by the Karat faction.

On the orders of the party leadership, Yechury agreed to remain in his post. But he has made clear that he and his supporters will exercise their right to overturn the Karat faction’s “tactical line” at this week’s congress.

According to press reports, more than seven thousand amendments to the fifty plus-page resolution have been submitted. A large number of these are said to directly pertain to the policy split within the party leadership.

The Karat faction is also reported to be preparing a challenge to Yechury’s re-election as general secretary, although he only assumed the post at the last congress in 2015. The general secretary will be selected by the incoming Central Committee and announced at the congress’s conclusion.

Behind the deep factional cleavage lies a huge erosion of the party’s electoral support, as a result of its implementation of right-wing policies where it has held state office and its close identification with Congress Party-led national governments, and of its influence within the Indian political establishment.

As recently as 2009, the CPM-led Left Front was the third-largest force in India’s parliament and governed three states, including West Bengal, where it held office since 1977.

Today it has less than a dozen seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the national parliament, and forms government only in Kerala.

The Yechury faction, which is based in West Bengal, fears that without an explicit bloc with Congress it will be wiped out in the 2019 elections, due to the state’s increasing electoral polarization between the Trinamul Congress and the BJP.

The Kerala-based Karat faction, on the other hand, believes that any explicit CPM bloc or “understanding” with the Congress will damage their prospects in Kerala, where the Congress is the Left Front’s principal adversary.

In addition to these conflicting electoral compulsions, the Karat faction, which includes much of the CPM-allied Centre of Indian Trade Unions bureaucracy, is motivated by its fear that allying with the Congress will only further discredit the CPM among working people and under conditions where there could be a rapid shift left. In this regard, Karat has highlighted the groundswell of support for the British Labour Party “left” Jeremy Corbyn, because of his claims to oppose austerity and war.

Shorn of its left-sounding rhetorical flourishes, Karat’s call for the CPM to focus on building “people’s movements” is based on the calculation that the Stalinists’ can best regain their influence within the Indian bourgeoisie by demonstrating that they continue to play a vital role in containing and politically smothering social opposition.

The real attitude of the Stalinists to the growing resistance of the working class is typified by their abandonment of the Maruti Suzuki workers who have been jailed for life on frame-up murder charges for challenging the sweatshop conditions that prevail in India’s new globally connected manufacturing industries.

Continuing their efforts to isolate the Maruti Suzuki workers, the Stalinists’ 50-page plus resolution contains not a single reference to them or their plight, although it is common knowledge that employers across India routinely threaten to “do a Maruti Suzuki” to intimidate and silence worker opposition.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>