

Voters go to polls in Tamil Nadu in second phase of India's national election

By V. Gnana
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Today voters in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu—which, with a population of 72 million, is India's sixth largest state—will vote in the second phase of India's seven-phase election to determine the make-up of the Lok Sabha, the lower and constitutionally more powerful house of India's parliament.

There is growing opposition to the policies of austerity and militarism carried out by India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, as evidenced by a mounting wave of strikes, farmer protests and popular struggles against industrial pollution and other forms of environmental devastation.

But this opposition can find no positive expression in the elections, which are characterized by right-wing anti-Pakistan sabre rattling, competing communalist and caste-ist appeals, phony populist promises and the expenditure of gobs of money. India's capitalist politicians will reportedly spend more than \$6 billion in competing for votes in this year's election, or more than two-thirds of what the Indian state spends annually on health care for the country's 1.37 billion people.

In Tamil Nadu the election is dominated by two reactionary alliances, fronted by rival Tamil-nationalist parties and allied respectively with the two "national" parties, the BJP and the Congress Party.

The first includes the BJP and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), which currently runs Tamil Nadu's state government. The other, the so-called Secular Progressive Alliance, includes the Congress Party, the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)—and the opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the other party of state government in Tamil Nadu.

All these parties are committed to right-wing, "pro-investor" policies and support the reckless military build-up of the Indian government, as it aligns with US war preparations against China. All are terrified by the growing militancy and opposition among workers in India and internationally.

Criticising BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi's failure to create jobs and economic development as he promised in the 2014 elections, the DMK is stumping for a "secular" and "democratic," Congress-led Indian government under Rahul Gandhi, who has succeeded his mother, father, grandmother and great-grandfather as the Congress Party's dynastic head.

The DMK is also promising to abolish the National Eligibility and Entrance Exam (NEET) for medical admissions that led to the

suicide of a promising female student in Tamil Nadu, S. Anitha; monetary subsidies to the poor; and giving Sri Lankan Tamil refugees Indian citizenship.

In the name of "social justice," the DMK advocates that reservations or affirmative action be expanded from the public to the private sector—a policy aimed at dividing the working class, by inciting workers and youth to fight each other along caste lines over "fairer" distribution of the misery produced by capitalism.

The AIADMK is promising a 1500 rupee (US\$21.61) monthly payout to people under the poverty line as a "poverty eradication" scheme. It is also appealing to Tamil nationalism, promising an amnesty for the seven Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists convicted of the 1991 assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, renewing calls for official investigations by the "international community" of war crimes during Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war, and demanding Tamil be made an all-India "official language" like Hindi.

Without exception, all Tamil Nadu's political parties, including the local units of the Stalinist CPI and CPM, promote Tamil nationalism to divide the working class and divert growing anger at social inequality and economic oppression along reactionary lines.

The Naam Thamilar Katchi (We Tamils Party), running independently under the leadership of Seeman, represents an extreme form of the Tamil chauvinism that is the lifeblood of establishment politics in the state. Seeman has denounced other politicians in Tamil Nadu for speaking other Indian languages besides Tamil, such as Malayalam and Telugu, and in a blatant appeal to ethnic-communalist sentiment is insisting that the state's chief minister must be "Tamil born."

Stalinist CPI and CPM block with big business parties against the working class

The Stalinist CPI and CPM aggressively oppose independent political struggle by the working class. In the name of fighting the BJP and the Hindu right, they have systematically subordinated working people to the Congress and a host of right-wing regional and caste-ist parties for decades.

The CPM is campaigning for the BJP government to be replaced by "an alternative secular government," that is a right-wing, pro-investor, pro-austerity government aligned with US imperialism and akin to the succession of national governments—most of them Congress Party led—that the Stalinists

helped stitch together and prop up between 1989 and 2008.

In an interview with *The Hindu*'s Tamil edition, leading CPI member D. Pandian criticized his CPM Left Front allies for not joining with the DMK in forming a national electoral alliance with the Congress, the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie. "Not declaring Rahul Gandhi as the prime ministerial candidate," proclaimed Pandian, "is a big blunder of the Communists."

While opposing the Congress in neighboring Kerala, whose state government it runs, the CPM is openly campaigning alongside Congress officials in Tamil Nadu, including former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, one of the principal architects of the Indian bourgeoisie's post-1991 neo-liberal "reform" agenda.

The Stalinists, like all the other parties, are silent on the enormous danger of war hanging over India and the world. The Indian bourgeoisie's collaboration with Washington has turned India into a "front-line state" in the US military-strategic offensive to isolate and prepare war with China. This has inflamed tensions between India and Pakistan, which is allied with China, leading to a military clash between the two nuclear-armed states in late February that nearly exploded into war.

The alternative to the bourgeoisie's agenda of war, immiseration and reaction is the independent political mobilization of the Indian working class, which includes fully 405 million people classified as "wage earners" in the ILO's latest report on India, as part of an international working class offensive against capitalism.

India's election is taking place as world politics are being transformed by an upsurge of international class struggle. Indian workers, peasants, and youth have come out in struggle against Modi's austerity measures and against the cheap-labour operations of the Indian subsidiaries and feeder-companies of the transnational corporations amid strikes and protests by workers in Sri Lanka, America, France, Poland, Algeria and other African countries.

In recent months workers in India, including in Tamil Nadu, have launched many strikes, including a two-day general strike last January against Modi's attacks on the working class that involved up to 180 million workers nationally.

Last fall, 3,000 workers at the Yamaha India and Royal Enfield motorcycle manufacturing plants, and the auto-parts manufacturer Myoung Shin India Automotive (MSI), struck in Oragadam, an industrial hub on the outskirts of Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai, for more than six weeks.

Teachers and other state government employees walked out on January 22 over nine demands, including the abolition of a Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS) and reestablishment of the previous government-funded pension system, higher wages, and improved working conditions. The AIADMK government responded by stepping up its attacks, dismissing 700 striking teachers and over 1,200 state employees.

The critical question facing politically advanced workers and youth is the building of a new political leadership in the working class. Arguments advanced to browbeat workers into voting for the DMK-Congress-Stalinist alliance are a mixture of hypocrisy and historical lies.

First they say, votes for the DMK-Congress alliance are for secularism and against the fascist threat posed by the BJP. But

they themselves constantly flirt with ethno-communist appeals made by forces like Seeman. Moreover, despite its secular pretensions, the Congress Party has a long history of conniving with the Hindu right, including in the reactionary 1947 communal Partition of British India into a Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, which it agreed to and implemented.

The DMK is claiming a Congress Party-led government would be more favorable to working people and could be pressured into restoring the CPS. This is a fraud.

It was the Narasimha Rao Congress Party government that, with the shipwreck of the bourgeoisie's state-led capitalist development project, spearheaded the implementation of free market policies aimed at turning India into a cheap labour haven for international finance capital. And it was the Congress-led UPA government of 2004-14 that under the guise of "reforms with a human face" pushed through a fresh wave of privatizations and other pro-investor policies, while forging a "global strategic partnership" with Washington.

The aftermath of the 2008 financial crash in India and internationally has shown that no progressive change in the interests of working people can arise within the framework of the existing political parties and trade unions. In the absence of a Trotskyist party fighting for the independent interests of the working class, this framework has served for decades to suppress the class struggle and channel the mounting anger among working people over the Congress Party's reactionary, big business policies back behind the BJP, and other caste-ist and communalist parties.

To advance the struggle for workers' power, workers in India need revolutionary leadership, armed with an international socialist program and strategy. This requires the building of an Indian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky in the struggle against the Stalinist betrayal of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

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