

# India's election and the revolutionary program to oppose austerity, war and communal reaction

By Keith Jones  
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The campaign for India's multi-phase national election, which will culminate with the tabulation of votes on May 23, has been a degrading spectacle. An estimated \$7 billion, or well over two-thirds of what the Indian state spends annually on healthcare for the country's 1.37 billion people, is being expended on a campaign dominated by foul communalist appeals, bellicose threats and phony populist promises.

From the outset, the campaign's tone has been set by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP government seized on a February 14 terrorist attack in Indian-held Kashmir to foment a war crisis, ordering air strikes deep inside Pakistan. It did so with the transparent aim of highlighting Modi's "strongman" political persona, suppressing popular anger over mass unemployment and India's protracted agrarian crisis, and mobilizing its *Hindutva-ite* activist base.

With Modi boasting that India could punish Pakistan at will, Pakistan's military, which justifies its claims to economic privileges and political power by invoking the threat from arch-nemesis India, felt compelled to respond. In the final days of February, South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers came closer to all-out war than at any time since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War.

As the war crisis unfolded, India's opposition parties from the Congress Party through the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) competed with Modi as to who could be the most effusive in their praise of the military. In response to Modi's relentless promotion of his "surgical strikes" and denunciations of his election rivals for appeasing Pakistan and undermining the military, the opposition subsequently criticized the BJP government for "politicizing" the airstrikes.

But none voiced so much as a word of criticism of Modi for recklessly bringing India to the brink of all-out war. This is because the entire opposition—and this is true of the Stalinists no less than the others—supports the Indian ruling elite's predatory great power ambitions, including its reactionary strategic rivalry with Pakistan. All have supported India's emergence as a major military power, with the world's fourth largest military budget, and all have been complicit in India's transformation under successive Congress and BJP-led governments into a front-line state in US imperialism's military-strategic offensive against China.

Five years ago, the BJP won the election with a campaign that focused on a demagogic appeal to deep-rooted social grievances, promising jobs and development, even as it projected Modi, who first came to national prominence for his role in instigating and facilitating the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, as its prime ministerial candidate.

In this election, Modi and the BJP have doubled down on Hindu communalism. Not a day goes by without some provocation, whether it be

BJP President Amit Shah vilifying Muslim migrants from Bangladesh as "termites" and vowing to throw them into the Bay of Bengal or Modi trumpeting an indicted Hindu supremacist terrorist as a "star" BJP candidate.

The BJP has been emboldened by the support that it enjoys in the military-intelligence apparatus and from India's business houses, which generally view it as the best bet to provide the "strong" government needed to push through further unpopular neo-liberal reforms and aggressively assert their interests on the world stage. The spinelessness and complicity of the opposition have also acted as an incitement. The Congress Party and its dynastic leader, Rahul Gandhi, made a whole series of communalist gestures and policy pronouncements in the run-up to the elections, in what even the corporate media characterized as a "Hindutva lite" campaign.

But the BJP'S turn to unabashed communal reaction is animated, above all, by its fear of growing social opposition. Modi and the Hindu right sense that the ground is shifting beneath them. In the past two-and-a-half years there has been a mounting wave of strikes and protests, spearheaded by an increasingly rebellious working class but also embracing large sections of rural and urban toilers. Tens of millions of workers across India joined a two-day general strike in January against the BJP government's savage austerity and pro-investor measures.

The strikes and farmer protests that have swept across India since 2017 are fueled by more than opposition to the BJP. They are challenging the pro-market, pro-investor agenda that all governments at both the all-India and the state level have pursued since 1991, when the Indian bourgeoisie, its post-independence state-led capitalist development having shipwrecked, forged a new partnership with imperialism based on India's transformation into a cheap-labour production hub for global capital.

## A malignant social order

To what extent opposition to the Modi government will find expression in the election remains unclear.

All the BJP's opponents are deeply discredited, having themselves championed pro-investor policies, enforced endemic poverty and presided over the rapacious growth of social inequality.

The Congress, until recently the bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, is no longer electorally competitive in vast swathes of north India. In a desperate attempt to generate election excitement and infuse "fresh blood," the Congress has proclaimed as its new star campaigner none other than Priyanka Varda, the sister of Rahul Gandhi, whose mother, father, grandmother and great-grandfather all preceded him as Congress Party president (the last three mentioned all serving as India's prime minister.)

Hoping to capitalize on popular anger against the two national big

business parties, a host of regional and caste-based parties are contesting the elections separately from the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance and the BJP's National Democratic Alliance (NDA). All these parties have previously participated in right-wing Congress and BJP governments. They cynically use ethno-chauvinist and caste-ist appeals to push for pelf and power for various bourgeois and petty-bourgeois factions and, above all, to divert and divide the working class.

In the name of "saving democracy" and "saving the Republic," the Stalinists and their Left Front are shamelessly supporting the push of a section of the bourgeoisie to replace the BJP with an alternate right-wing government, most likely Congress-led. They are mounting an "Anybody but BJP" campaign, urging working people to support whichever party or electoral alliance is best positioned to defeat the BJP/NDA in a given state, while crowing about the leading role they played in stitching together and propping up a succession of "non BJP governments" between 1989 and 2008.

All these governments, but especially the Narasimha Rao (1991–96) and Manmohan Singh (2004–14) Congress-led governments, blazed the path for the Modi government. The former implemented the first wave of "big bang" pro-investor policies, while the latter pressed forward with privatization, deregulation and marketization, while forging a "global strategic partnership" with US imperialism.

Whatever the election outcome and the precise composition of India's next government—whether it is led by the BJP, Congress or a "Federal Front" of smaller parties—it will be a government of austerity and reaction. The bourgeoisie's agenda was briefly outlined in a recent *Times of India* editorial. Titled "After the poll: Economic reforms and cultivating friends are crucial for India's strategic heft," it demanded "resolute reforms" and a strengthening of the Indo-US alliance, including by "getting the Quad"—a NATO-style anti-China alliance comprised of the US, Japan, Australia and India—"working."

A headlong clash between the incipient rebellion of working people against the ruinous impact of decades of pro-investor neo-liberal reform and India's next government is inevitable.

To prepare for it, the most class conscious workers and youth must take up the fight to mobilize the working class as an independent political force, rallying the rural toilers and all the oppressed behind it in the fight for a workers' government.

The more than seven-decades-long history of "independent" India stands as an indictment of the bourgeoisie and a confirmation in the negative of the program that animated the 1917 Russian Revolution and will be forever synonymous with the name of Leon Trotsky—Permanent Revolution. In the countries historically oppressed by imperialism, the basic tasks of the democratic revolution can be resolved only through a working class-led socialist revolution and as an integral part of the world struggle for socialism.

Contemporary capitalist India is a malignant society, in which caste-ism, landlordism, bonded labour and other feudal vestiges are interlaced with the most advanced forces of globally organized capitalist exploitation. At the height of society, criminality reigns. India's newly minted 130-strong cohort of billionaires and the rest of the capitalist elite gorge on obscene wealth while employing state violence and the divide-and-rule caste and communalist politics pioneered by India's former British colonial overlords to suppress all social opposition.

Social inequality in India now rivals that under the British Raj. The top 1 percent monopolizes 71 percent of India's wealth, whilst hundreds of millions survive on less than \$2 per day and Modi struts the world stage seeking to drum up investment with the boast that wages in India are one-quarter those in China.

Under conditions of world capitalist breakdown, trade war and surging geopolitical tensions, India's ruling elite is playing an especially vile and incendiary role. It is encouraging US imperialism in its war drive against

China by aligning itself diplomatically and militarily ever more tightly with Washington. At the same time, New Delhi is seeking to leverage any strategic favours Washington bestows on India to mount its own campaign of aggression, intrigue and war and impose itself as a regional hegemon.

The enmeshing of the reactionary Indo-Pakistani and Sino-Indian conflicts with the US-China strategic confrontation represents an enormous threat to the working people of Asia and the world. This has already been highlighted by the three war crises—two with Pakistan and the ten-week military standoff with Chinese troops over control of a Himalayan plateau in the summer of 2017—in which India has been embroiled just since September 2016.

### **Stalinism and the rise of the Hindu right**

The struggle to politically arm the working class with the program of international socialism requires a settling of accounts with Stalinism.

The CPM, CPI and their trade union affiliates have for decades functioned as an integral part of the bourgeois political establishment. They are primarily responsible for the burning contradiction that is at the heart of social and political life in India. The past three decades of capitalist expansion have resulted in a massive growth in the size and social power of the working class. Yet the bourgeoisie has been able to appropriate an ever greater share of the wealth produced by working people, who are completely politically disenfranchised.

This is not because the ruling class offensive has gone unchallenged. But the Stalinists have systematically suppressed the class struggle and enforced the bourgeoisie's neo-liberal agenda. This includes supporting a series of right-wing national governments, under the guise of blocking the BJP from power, and implementing what they themselves term "pro-investor" policies in the states where they have held office—West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

As a result, the bourgeoisie has been able to implement its socially regressive agenda. And with the Stalinists politically paralyzing the working class, preventing it from advancing its own socialist solution to the social crisis and supporting and implementing right-wing measures, the Hindu right has been able to batten off popular frustration and fears over deepening economic insecurity.

After three decades in which the CPM and CPI's principal purported aim has been to counter the BJP, the Hindu supremacist menace is stronger than ever.

Today, in response to the deepening class struggle in India and the resurgence of working class opposition around the world, the Stalinists are redoubling their efforts to shackle the working class to the bourgeoisie, its parties and its state.

The Stalinists' attitude toward the growing movement of the working class is epitomized by their virulent opposition to the struggle to mobilize the working class in defence of the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers jailed for life on frame-up charges for leading opposition to poverty wages and precarious employment at India's largest auto manufacturer. For the CPM, CPI and their union affiliates, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the Maruti Suzuki workers are unmentionable because the fight for their freedom cuts across their cozy relations with the Congress Party, which initiated their frame up, and with the employers. Moreover, it would put the lie to their claims that the Indian state is a "democratic" bulwark on which working people should rely in opposing communal reaction.

The *World Socialist Web Site* appeals to Indian workers, youth and socialist-minded professionals to take up the fight for the independent political mobilization and international unification of the working class under revolutionary leadership. A key element is the rallying of the masses of South Asia across the reactionary, ethno-communal state borders that were drawn by the Raj's departing British colonial overlords

and rival factions of the native bourgeoisie in 1947–48 in order to mount a united struggle against war and imperialism and undertake the fight for the Socialist United States of South Asia.

This strategy—Permanent Revolution—is embodied in, and animates the political work of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 in struggle against the Stalinist betrayal of the 1917 Russian Revolution and led since 1953 by the International Committee of the Fourth International. Its realization urgently requires the building of the Indian section of the ICFI.

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