

India's watershed election

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The Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was swept to power in last week's Indian national election. Gujarat Chief Minister and self-styled Hindu strongman Narendra Modi—who gained Indian and indeed international infamy for his role in instigating the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat—is to become prime minister, supposedly to lead economic “development.”

Indian and international capital have embraced the BJP as the instrument to push through unpopular, free-market measures and align India more closely with US foreign policy. The party's program includes deep cuts to social services; scrapping food, energy and fertilizer price subsidies; privatizing state-owned companies; eliminating remaining limits on foreign investment; shifting the tax burden onto workers; and massive state handouts to the banks.

The programs targeted for elimination constitute for hundreds of millions of Indian people the difference between malnourishment and starvation. The ground is being laid for an eruption of class struggle.

While the BJP is the first party in thirty years to win an outright parliamentary majority, the press's claims that the Indian people shifted far to the right are a fraud. The BJP benefited by default from mass disillusionment with the Congress Party and the two Stalinist Communist Parties, which suffered an historic collapse.

The Congress, which has led the national government for all but 13 of the 67 years of independent India, now has just 44 seats in the 545-seat Lok Sabha—not enough even to be recognized as the official opposition. Ten years ago, the Stalinist-led Left Front won over 60 seats in India's parliament and promptly put themselves at the disposal of the Congress. Today the Communist Party of India has but one seat in the Lok Sabha, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has only 9.

The Congress is and has always been a capitalist

party. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, it betrayed and suppressed the mass anti-imperialist struggle. It cut a deal with British imperialism in 1947, under which the subcontinent was communally partitioned into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, amid fighting between India's ethnic and sectarian communities that left millions dead and displaced.

Nevertheless, because of its association with the struggle against British rule, the Congress was the only bourgeois party with a measure of support across India's myriad ethnic and communal groups. It hence proved indispensable to the Indian bourgeoisie. It sought to offset imperialist pressure through import substitution, state ownership of major industries and close relations with the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR.

By the 1970s, this strategy was in grave crisis. The Congress government of Indira Gandhi came into headlong conflict with the working class, using the army to smash the 1974-75 rail strike and imposing a two-year Emergency, during which civil liberties were suppressed.

Since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Congress has played the pivotal role in the Indian bourgeoisie's “new economic policy,” transforming India into a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism. The Narasimha Rao Congress government of 1991-96 initiated this shift, scrapping national economic regulation in favor of export-led growth and free-market policies to attract foreign capital.

The Congress-led government of the last decade further expanded and extended India's free-market restructuring. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh went on national television in September 2012 to lecture the Indian people on the need to “tighten their belts” so as to attract more foreign investment.

As the Indian bourgeoisie enriched itself by providing

cheap labor to transnational corporations, the Congress also deepened its relations with the United States. Again led by the Congress, India has since 2000 sought a “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism—as Washington invaded a succession of countries, including Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. US relations with India have been part of its “pivot to Asia” aimed at isolating and threatening China.

The Congress’s catastrophic defeat reflects the fact that, after a quarter century of imposing such policies, it has lost all credibility among Indian workers and oppressed masses.

The parallel collapse of the Stalinist CPI and CPI(M) is no coincidence. Since the CPI’s consolidation in the 1930s, the Stalinists have opposed a struggle for socialism led by the working class, as advocated by the Trotskyist movement. Instead, they systematically subordinated the workers to capitalist parties.

Before 1991, they insisted that socialism was not yet on the agenda in India. They called for support to “progressive,” “anti-feudal” or “anti-imperialist” sections of the Indian bourgeoisie in carrying through the “national-democratic revolution.” Since 1991, as the Indian bourgeoisie moved sharply to the right and towards imperialism, the Stalinists lurched to the right with them.

In the name of opposing the BJP, they propped up a succession of governments implementing free-market, pro-imperialist policies.

While the Stalinists blocked the working class from a struggle for socialism and subordinated it to the Congress and myriad right-wing caste-based and regional parties—all of them touted by the Stalinists as bulwarks of “secular India”—the BJP was left free to exploit mass disaffection with Congress and a quarter-century of pro-market “reform.”

India’s BJP-led government will be a regime of intense crisis. It is beholden to the fascistic, Hindu-communalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), bellicose elements of the security forces, and the most rapacious sections of big business. As it seeks to impose an unpopular social agenda, it will pursue closer ties with imperialism, especially the United States and Japan, charging ahead into the US “pivot to Asia” and the preparation for large-scale war.

The working class clearly faces grave dangers. However, the victory of the BJP and the collapse of the

Congress and Stalinist parties presage not only a vast intensification of the class struggle, but a fundamental realignment of the politics of the working class.

Such a realignment requires the drawing of a historical balance sheet of the shipwreck of “independent” bourgeois rule and Indian Stalinism, and the building of a new mass party of the working class based on the program of Permanent Revolution, elaborated by Leon Trotsky and which animated the 1917 Russian Revolution.

The entire experience of India has demonstrated the inability of the bourgeoisie to resolve the basic social and democratic tasks—including the unification of the masses of the subcontinent, the liquidation of caste oppression and landlordism, and freedom from imperialism. These tasks can be resolved only through the independent mobilization of the working class, on the basis of an international socialist program.



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