

India: Stalinists and Congress Party VP Rahul Gandhi jointly campaign in West Bengal

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Leaders of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, joined Rahul Gandhi, the Vice President of the Congress, the traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie, on the platforms of Congress election rallies in West Bengal last weekend.

The CPM and its Left Front are jointly contesting the West Bengal state elections with the Congress Party. Polling in India's fourth most populous state is being held in six phases between April 4 and May 5.

Gandhi, the heir to the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty that has dominated the Congress for seven decades, used his West Bengal election rallies to give the Congress high command's blessing for a Left Front-Congress coalition government. Addressing a rally in Bardhaman district, Gandhi said: "I've agreed with what you wanted. Now you go along with Left workers, hold their hands, and defeat (West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee) and the Trinamool Congress. Bring a coalition government in Bengal."

The Stalinist CPM has a long history of propping up right-wing Congress governments at the Centre. It supported the Congress government of Narasimha Rao in the first half of the 1990s, as it initiated pro-market reforms aimed at making India a cheap-labour haven for global capital. And for four years from May 2004 through June 2008, the Left Front provided the votes to sustain the Congress-led UPA government in office, as it accelerated neoliberal economic restructuring and forged an Indo-US "global strategic partnership."

That said, the Stalinists' West Bengal election campaign is unprecedented. Never before has the CPM mounted a joint election campaign with the big-business Congress, shared election platforms with senior Congress leaders, or advocated a Left-Congress coalition government.

Indeed, only a few months ago, when the CPM began discussion of its strategy for the state elections being held this spring in West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry

and Assam, party leaders reaffirmed their supposed implacable opposition to the "neoliberal Congress." Then, when the CPM Central Committee met in mid-February, it authorized an "unofficial understanding" with the Congress. In the ensuing days, as CPM and Congress leaders conducted negotiations on which constituencies would be allotted to the Left Front and which to the Congress, Left Front Chairman and CPM Politburo member Biman Bose insisted there was no question of a joint CPM-Congress election campaign.

Now the two are proclaiming their readiness to jointly govern West Bengal. Senior CPM leader and former state minister Bangshagopal Chowdhury, who joined Gandhi at his Niyamatpur rally, echoed the Congress leader's call for a coalition government. "To restore democracy," said Chowdhury, "we have joined hands with democratic and secular forces including the Congress. We will form a left and democratic secular government."

As in the case of their electoral alliance, it was the CPM that initiated public discussion about governing in tandem with the Congress. In its election manifesto, which was released at the beginning of last month, the CPM declared that its aim is to bring to power a "Left democratic secular government," rather than a Left Front government.

Underlining the Stalinists' eagerness to rule West Bengal jointly with the Congress, that is, with the party that over the past quarter century has done most of the heavy lifting in implementing pro-investor reforms and aligning India with US imperialism, Biman Bose declared on the manifesto's release, "In election after election, we called upon people to vote for Left candidates and help us form a Left Front government. But this time, we were flexible while framing the manifesto... We want to bring all democratic and secular forces on a common platform. A total unity among people can help install a Left democratic secular government."

With the Congress signalling that it is prepared to enter a formal coalition, not just prop up a minority CPM-led

government, the Stalinists have become even more forthright in their intentions. The leader of the CPM in the West Bengal Assembly and its presumptive candidate for Chief Minister, Surya Kanata Mishra, told a March 29 Kolkata press conference: "Let me give you a clear message. We have not given a call for ushering in the eighth Left Front government. We have asked for a Left, democratic and secular government. That includes the Congress."

Reporting on the impact of Gandhi's public endorsement of a Congress-Left coalition, the *Kolkata Telegraph* said, "Rahul's statements have set the stage for a larger," i.e. national, "Congress-CPM understanding." The *Telegraph* then referenced the Left's role in bringing the Congress-led UPA to power in Delhi in 2004 and sustaining it in office for four years.

The immediate impulse for the coming together of the Stalinists and the Congress is the severe crisis wracking both parties. In the 2014 national elections both suffered their worst ever electoral defeat. After presiding over deepening social inequality, rampant inflation, and a "jobless boom," the Congress failed to win even 50 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's parliament), denying it Official Opposition status. The CPM won just nine seats, and only two in West Bengal, which it had ruled for 34 consecutive years ending in 2011. If the Hindu supremacist BJP, not the Stalinists, benefited from the mass anger with the Congress, it was because the CPM had propped up the Congress-led UPA for years and implemented similar pro-investor policies in those states where it formed the government, West Bengal and Kerala.

More fundamentally, the Stalinists' turn to the Congress is rooted in the intensification of class conflict. Under conditions where the Indian bourgeoisie has brought to power the self-styled "Hindu strongman" Narendra Modi to push through socially incendiary economic "reforms" and draw India still more deeply into the US war drive against China, the Stalinists are redoubling their efforts to harness the working class to the Indian political establishment and state.

The Stalinists claim that their alliance with the Congress is the only way to "save democracy and secularism" in West Bengal. "Our primary objective," declares the Left Front election manifesto, "is to restore democracy in West Bengal. With this end in view, we will have to defeat the Trinamool government and decimate BJP."

There is no question that the Trinamool Congress is a vicious opponent of the working class, that regularly uses violence against its political opponents, and that the BJP is stoking communalism and resorting to authoritarian methods of rule, as exemplified in the sedition charges brought against JNU students accused of raising "anti-national

slogans."

But if these reactionary forces have been able to come to the fore, it is precisely because the working class has been politically suppressed, has been prevented by the Stalinists from advancing its own solution to the social crisis and has been harnessed by them to the big-business Congress and a host of other right-wing casteist and communalist parties.

In portraying the Congress as a democratic and secular bulwark, the CPM is forced to brazenly lie. The Congress has connived with the Hindu right for decades, including in enforcing the 1947-48 communal partition of India and Bengal. In 1984 Rahul Gandhi's father, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, whitewashed the Congress leaders who instigated an anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. And Congress governments have ruthlessly suppressed worker and peasant struggles—from the thousands, including many CPM members and supporters, who were killed by Congress-led West Bengal governments in the 1960s and 1970s, to the Congress government in Haryana that organized the 2012 frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

In keeping with their electoral alliance with the big-business Congress, the Stalinist CPM has made "industrialisation," that is, the courting of investors, its central campaign plank.

Although he is in ailing health, the former CPM West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee is serving as the poster boy for the CPM's "industrialisation" campaign. To woo investors, Bhattacharjee's government banned strikes in the IT and IT-enabled sector and used police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to land expropriations for big-business development projects.

In a recent campaign appearance, Bhattacharjee compared favourably the policies of Gujarat, which Modi ruled for over a decade ending in 2014, with those of West Bengal's Trinamool Congress (TMC) government. Claiming that companies like Infosys and Wipro that had invested in West Bengal under his government are now planning to leave, Bhattacharjee lamented, "At present, Gujarat is getting all the advantage because there is no political party like TMC there."



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