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India's anti-Modi opposition electoral alliance: A right-wing political trap for the working class

Leaders of India's recently minted opposition electoral alliance are holding two days of meetings in Mumbai, concluding with a formal get-together Friday.

The alliance—which claims to offer a “progressive,” “democratic,” and “secular” alternative to the nine-year-old, far-right government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP—is made up of more than two dozen parties. Prominent among them are: the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government; the Trinamool Congress and the DMK, the ethno-regional parties that govern respectively West Bengal and Tamil Nadu; the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), caste-based regional parties that are major players in the establishment politics of the Hindi-belt states of the Gangetic Plain; and the Aam Aadmi (Common Man's) Party, a purported anti-corruption party that heads the government in Punjab and the National Capital Territory, Delhi.

All of these parties, beginning with the Congress Party, support and when in office have implemented the Indian bourgeoisie's ruthless pro-investor agenda of deregulation, privatization, the promotion of precarious contract-labour employment and massive tax cuts for big business and the rich. They also all support India's rapid military build-up and the “Indo-US Global Strategic Partnership,” through which New Delhi has been integrated ever more fully into American imperialism's military-strategic offensive against China.



Friday's meeting is the third conclave of the anti-BJP opposition alliance. At the second held in Bangalore on July 17-18, 26 parties agreed to contest the coming national elections jointly under the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance or INDIA banner. [Photo: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin]

None of this has caused the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Maoist Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation—the slightest pause. They are among the most enthusiastic members of the opposition alliance and fully support its aim: providing the Indian bourgeoisie with an alternate, right-wing government-in-waiting.

The reactionary character of the opposition alliance, which has dubbed itself the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance or INDIA, is underscored by the prominent role that is being played within it by Nitish Kumar, the Chief Minister of Bihar, India's third largest state, and his Janata Dal (United). From 1997 to 2014 and again from 2017 until August of last year, Kumar and his Janata Dal (United) or its predecessor, the Samata Party, were part of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and its governments, first under Atal Vajpayee and then Modi. Meanwhile in Bihar, the BJP repeatedly served as the junior partner in JD (U)-headed coalition governments.

It was Nitish Kumar who convened and chaired the first meeting of the nascent alliance, held in Patna on June 23 and attended by 16 opposition parties. In recent weeks Kumar has repeatedly praised Vajpayee, the first ever BJP prime minister and like Modi a lifelong member of the Hindu supremacist RSS. This included publicly paying homage to Vajpayee at his memorial in Delhi last month on the anniversary of his death. By doing so,

Kumar is signalling that the JD (U) retains other options if it is not given the prominence it believes is its due in the INDIA alliance.

The meetings in Mumbai are officially being hosted by Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray, the head of one of two rival factions of the Shiv Sena, the fascistic party founded by his father, the notorious Maharashtra chauvinist and communalist Bal Thackeray. While Nitish Kumar claims, however absurdly, to be an opponent of communalism, the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) champions *Hindutva*, the noxious Hindu supremacist ideology to which the BJP and Modi adhere.

At this week's meeting, the leaders of the INDIA alliance have said they will come up with a "Common Minimum Program" that will supposedly outline the main policies they would pursue were they to succeed in unseating the BJP and its NDA in the general election slated for spring 2024.

Hitherto, they have spoken only in the vaguest and most predictable terms about the social crisis that is ravaging India, deploring mass joblessness, endemic poverty and the nexus of government-big business corruption.

Some of the most important participants, such as the DMK, are, with the Stalinists' support, pressing for INDIA to call for the extension of reservation—affirmative action-type quotas for Dalits and other historically oppressed caste groups—to the private sector. While touted as a blow for "social justice" and a counterpoint to the BJP's Hindu nationalist appeals, the calls for a further expansion of the reservation system are deeply reactionary. They serve to divide the working class and embroil it in a fratricidal struggle for a more "equitable" distribution of the misery created by capitalism.

Any Common Minimum Program the opposition parties do propose is expected to say little about foreign policy. But it should be noted that the Congress Party has repeatedly attacked the BJP government from the right for not taking a more aggressive stance in the three-year-old border stand-off with China. Aam Aadmi Party National Convenor and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has, for his part, called for a "national boycott" of all Chinese goods.

Friday's opposition conclave is also expected to broach the highly contentious question of seat-sharing, and it may name an official convenor, although the media is reporting some parties are opposed to this because of its potential impact on the future selection of a prime ministerial candidate.

A reactionary alliance of discredited parties

INDIA is a political fraud. It is a reactionary alliance of largely discredited capitalist parties, no less beholden to the bourgeoisie than the BJP, that are mired in corruption, casteism, regional-chauvinist politics and, notwithstanding their secular pretensions, communalism.

Significantly, at their second meeting held in Bangalore on July 18, the 26 parties in attendance adopted a brief resolution that condemned the “hatred and violence being manufactured against minorities” and went on to name Dalits, Adivasis (tribal peoples) and Kashmiri Pandits as targets. Omitted was any mention of India’s Muslims, who are subject to a relentless campaign of vilification and intimidation by the BJP and its Hindu right allies.

In Madhya Pradesh, India’s fifth largest state, the Congress Party is preparing for the state elections to be held later this year by trying to outflank the BJP on the right. It recently accepted within its ranks a Hindutva-espousing outfit named the Bajrang Sena. It is the Congress that has played the leading role in projecting the Shiva Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) as a “progressive” ally and valued INDIA constituent. One could go on and on.

The opposition alliance is borne out of fear of a gathering storm of social opposition from below. Explosive often protracted struggles have erupted among workers across India against privatization, contract labour, the non-payment of wages and job cuts.

While the BJP trumpets India’s “world-beating” growth, the reality is India is riven by massive social inequality, with the richest 1 percent of Indians owning four times the wealth of the poorest 70 percent of the population.

The COVID-19 pandemic and now the economic shocks emanating from the war instigated by US-NATO against Russia in Ukraine have exacerbated hunger and malnutrition. According to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, 7.9 percent of the population is unemployed. This in a country with no state income support for the jobless.

Through its relentless promotion of communalism, the BJP seeks to divert socio-economic anxiety and frustration away from any challenge to capitalist exploitation and split the working class.

While they adapt to and connive with the Hindu right, the opposition parties give voice to the fears of sections of the ruling class that the BJP’s rabid communalism and escalating

authoritarianism and lawlessness is dangerously discrediting and destabilizing the military, courts and other state institutions the ruling class depends on to enforce its rule.

The opposition alliance is also animated by fear of the BJP's drive to monopolize power in its own hands, including by running roughshod over parliamentary norms and India's federal constitution. Following the example of Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, the BJP treats its bourgeois political opponents as semi-treasonous, with repeated accusations they are conspiring with foreign forces to blacken India's name or practising Muslim "appeasement."

Although previous Indian governments have manipulated corruption charges and criminal investigations to target political opponents, the Modi government has taken this to a new level. In March, Rahul Gandhi, the de facto leader of the Congress Party and scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family dynasty that controls India's Grand Old Party, was sentenced to two years in prison and stripped of his seat in parliament as the result of transparently trumped-up charges and politically motivated decisions by the courts in Gujarat, Modi's home state. Last month the Supreme Court set aside Gandhi's conviction, allowing him to return to parliament, pending the outcome of his appeal.

The Stalinists—a highly valued faction of India's political establishment

Electoral support for the Stalinists and their Left Front has haemorrhaged over the past decade and a half as a result of their role in propping up the big business Congress-led UPA government and imposing pro-investor policies in the states where they have held office. Today the Stalinists lead the government in just one of India's 28 states, Kerala, and between them the CPM and CPI have just five MPs in the 543-member lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha.

However, the Stalinists have played an important role in stitching together the ramshackle INDIA electoral bloc and are viewed, especially by the Congress Party—which, having led India's national government for the lion's share of the last 75 years, has the most intimate ties to the bourgeoisie—as a crucial constituent of the anti-BJP alliance.

The Stalinists are expected to provide the opposition alliance with desperately needed "progressive" colours. Even more importantly, through their trade union federations they continue to exert political influence over key sections of the working class—influence that they will use to suppress the class struggle and divert the growing anger of workers and rural toilers behind the Congress and the INDIA alliance.

At a rally in Kolkata last month—politically led by the CPM-allied Centre of India Trade Unions (CITU) and in which numerous unions and union federations, including those

affiliated to the Congress and other big business parties, participated—the unions announced that their central goal is the BJP government's replacement by the INDIA alliance in the coming election. This was encapsulated in the slogan "Remove Modi, Save the Country."

For more than three decades, the Stalinists have supported one right-wing government after another at the Centre and in the states in the name of fighting the "fascist BJP." With the working class politically suppressed and prevented from advancing its own socialist solution to the capitalist crisis, the threat from the Hindu right has only grown.

Today, with the institutions of Indian capitalist democracy, like those around the world, visibly rotting on their feet, the Stalinists are intensifying their efforts to chain the working class to the Indian state and the Congress and a host of other right-wing caste-ist and ethno-chauvinist parties.

Workers and socialist-minded youth must chart an entirely different and opposed course. The struggle to defend democratic rights and defeat communal reaction must be based on the class struggle. It must be inextricably linked to the fight for social equality and against imperialist war and the Indian bourgeoisie's predatory alliance with US imperialism.

It requires that the working class unite its manifold struggles and forge itself into an independent political power, rallying the rural masses behind it in struggle against Indian capitalism and all its political representatives and for a workers and peasants' government committed to the socialist transformation of South Asia and the world.

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