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DEFEND THE PRO-PEOPLE

LEFT FRONT GOVERNMENT IN WEST BENGAL

Introduction

The Left Front government in West Bengal completed 33 years in office on June 21, 2010. This record of remaining uninterruptedly in office for three decades by winning 7 successive state assembly elections is unparalleled in the country and indeed a record for any elected Government in the world. The government could achieve this by winning the trust of the people of West Bengal, especially the trust of the working class and the peasantry, through its pro-people programme and policies.

Ever since it assumed office in 1977, the Left Front government has pursued a programme of providing relief to the people and adopted alternative policies, despite the constraints faced by a State government functioning within India's bourgeois-landlord set up. The Left Front government has implemented thoroughgoing land reforms and established a vibrant Panchayati Raj. These historic initiatives have broken the back of landlordism in the rural areas of West Bengal, invigorated the agrarian economy, empowered the poor peasants and agricultural workers and brought lakhs of rural families out of abject poverty.

Several other pro-people policies have been undertaken in regard to strengthening workers' rights and social sector development, which have benefited different sections of the people: factory workers, unorganised workers, government employees, school and college teachers, students, youth and women. Initiatives have been taken to uplift the conditions of the dalits, adivasis and minorities. Through their experience, the people came to recognize the Left Front government as a pro-people government and a custodian of their rights. The unstinted support of the people for the Left Front has made West Bengal the bastion of the Left movement in the country.

Attack by Anti-Left Forces

During the recent period, this bastion has come under intense attack. Ever since the Left Front won the assembly elections in 2006 with a big majority, the anti-Left forces have launched a counter-offensive. On the one hand, there is a political gang-up of all anti-Left forces in the state under the leadership of the reactionary Trinamul Congress. On the other hand, there is a concerted effort to physically target, terrorise and annihilate Left cadres in the rural areas, particularly those from poor and socially deprived background. **Over 250 activists and sympathisers of the Left, mainly belonging to the CPI (M), have been killed in West Bengal since May 2009.** Those killed include comrades from the most oppressed sections of society, brave cadres from the adivasis, scheduled castes, minorities. Most of these gruesome killings are being carried out by the Trinamul Congress (TMC) in league with the Maoists. The Congress party, a junior partner of the anti-Left alliance in the state, is also extending support to this murderous campaign and is directly involved in these attacks in some districts.

Clearly, the ruling classes in India and their political representatives cannot tolerate the alternative policies that the West Bengal Left Front government pursues. Another basic reason behind the intensified attacks is the crucial role that the Left movement in West Bengal has played in enabling the Left movement in the country as a whole to mount a strong resistance against the pro-imperialist anti people policies of the Central Government.

While supporting the Congress led Government from outside during the period of 2004 to 2008, the Left played a crucial role in blocking rightwing policies like disinvestment in PSUs, opening up sectors like banking, insurance, retail, higher education etc. to foreign capital and further liberalization/deregulation of sectors like food, agriculture, petroleum and mining. The Left forced the Government to raise more taxes from the rich and spend on social welfare schemes for the poor like the NREGA. The Left also resolutely opposed India's strategic alliance with US imperialism, which was being cemented through the nuclear deal. This has hurt the interests of international finance capital, MNCs – mainly the American ones – and big corporates in India. It is therefore in the interest of these sections of the imperialists and Indian ruling classes to weaken the Left, so that the pro-imperialist, neoliberal

policies can be implemented in the country without hindrances. **And weakening the Left is not possible without attacking the strongest bastion of the Left in West Bengal.**

Ire of Communal and Fundamentalist Forces

The Left Front government in West Bengal and the Left movement have emerged as a bulwark against the communal and fundamentalist forces, in defence of secularism and the rights of minority communities. In a state, which has historically been afflicted by communal violence and strife, the Left Front government's policies and movements led by the Left have strengthened secularism and made West Bengal the safest and most secure state for the minority communities. Communal and fundamentalist forces have therefore always been hostile to the Left in West Bengal. These forces are actively backing the anti-Left forces today to weaken the Left, in order to expand their political space in the state.

TMC-Maoist led Offensive

The issue of industrialization in West Bengal was used by the opposition to mount a vicious campaign against the left Front. Although not an inch of land was acquired in Nandigram, misgivings were created among sections of the peasantry that their land will be forcibly taken away. The TMC has used the situation to bring in the Maoists, mobilise all the anti-Left forces around this TMC-Maoist axis and launch a violent offensive against the Left Front. **This TMC-Maoist led offensive has the backing of imperialist forces and Indian big business on the one hand and the erstwhile rural elites in West Bengal on the other, who seek to regain their hegemony by rolling back land reforms.** Anti-democratic separatist forces in West Bengal like the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha and Kamtapur Liberation Organisation have also joined the anti-Left offensive in North Bengal. The Congress-led Government at the Centre, while paying lip service against Maoist violence, has chosen to turn a blind eye to the open collusion between the Union Railway Minister and the Maoists.

Alongside physical attacks on the cadres of the Left, the anti-Left forces have also unleashed a vicious campaign against the CPI (M) and the Left Front government in West Bengal to tarnish its image and record. In this, they have found a set of willing allies in

sections of the corporate media as well as some anti-Communist NGOs. These entities are working overtime, spreading canards against the Left and trying to paint a progressive mask for the TMC leader, in order to spread confusion among the allies of the Left and cover up for the violent, semi-fascist character of the anti-Left forces. **The entire effort is geared towards demonizing and vilifying the Left Front government and dehumanizing the CPI (M) cadres with grotesque lies, so as to justify the barbaric slaughter of over 250 innocent and poor people!**

Slander on Land Acquisition

The slander campaign against the Left Front government is mainly based on land acquisition. An impression has been created as if the government is forcibly acquiring huge tracts of farmland for building SEZs and other private industries. What is the reality? Let us take the example of SEZs. Since the SEZ Act was notified in 2006, only 11 SEZs have been built in West Bengal till date, out of which 9 are IT/ITES SEZs mostly built on 10 to 20 hectares of land, with the largest one built on 48.5 hectares. Altogether, these 11 SEZs have required 210 hectares of land. Contrast this with the fact that in Goa, 3 SEZs have been built on 250 hectares. **Therefore, the reality is that the area of land under SEZs in West Bengal is even lower than that of a small state like Goa!**

Moreover, during the same period, out of the 363 SEZs built across the country, Andhra Pradesh has built 74 SEZs - the largest number in a state - that have come up on 12300 hectares of land. The table below shows how other states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu etc. have built SEZs on large tracts of land:

**Special Economic Zones in Selected States
Notified Since 2006**

State	Number of SEZs	Total Area under SEZs (in hectares)	Size of Largest SEZ (in hectares)
Andhra Pradesh	74	12300	2206
Maharashtra	62	9150	1597
Tamil Nadu	57	4470	1019
Karnataka	32	2160	588
Haryana	32	1380	440
Gujarat	30	8600	6214
West Bengal	11	210	48
Goa	3	250	123

Thus, while the baseless calumny against the Left Front government regarding acquisition of large tracts of land has continued unabated despite the West Bengal government not allowing large SEZs to come up, states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Haryana have handed over thousands of acres of land to big corporates and real estate developers for SEZs. Those who have been crying themselves hoarse about supposed land acquisition for SEZs in West Bengal have not cared to protest against the proliferation of SEZs in these states.

Moreover, at a time when forests in various states are being destroyed through indiscriminate commercial exploitation and illegal mining, West Bengal has not only prevented such predatory exploitation of the environment but has succeeded in enhancing the forest cover in the state from around 14% in the 1980s to over 16.6% presently. While states like Uttarachal, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra etc. have been granting forest clearances for commercial projects on a large scale, the West Bengal government has the record of granting the least number of forest clearances among the major states of the country (along with Bihar).

It is even more ironical that the Left Front government was being castigated for taking away farmers' land precisely at a time when the government was redistributing significant amount of land to the landless families in rural areas. **16700 acres (6760 hectares) of land was distributed by the government between 2007 and 2010. The government is also distributing homestead land worth Rs. 20000 (0.1 to 0.5 acre), free of cost to each landless family in rural areas. Besides, over 26000 pattas have already been distributed to adivasis and other forest dwellers for 15300 acres under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA).** The Maoists in league with the TMC has held up the process of FRA implementation in districts like Paschim Medinipur by threatening adivasis who want to claim their rights under the Act.

Best Record in Land Reforms

West Bengal continues to hold the foremost position in land reforms in the country. Total agricultural land distributed in West Bengal amounts to over 11.28 lakh acres upto February 2010. Over 30.1 lakh farmers have benefited from the land reforms

programme, 55% of whom belong to dalit or adivasi households. With a view to empowering women, 6.15 lakh joint pattas and 1.62 lakh female pattas have been distributed. Through recording of sharecroppers (barga), which forms an important component of land reforms, another 15.13 lakh farmers have benefited. **West Bengal accounts for 54% of all land reform beneficiaries in the entire country till date.**

Pro-Peasant Policies

The land reforms initiative have ensured that 84% of agricultural land in West Bengal is owned by small and marginal peasants. Promotion of small and micro irrigation projects, has increased the net irrigated area as a proportion of total agricultural land in the state from only 32% in 1977-78 to 72% at present, even as the national average is only 45% at present. At a time when the neoliberal policies of withdrawal of the state from agriculture pursued by the Centre has spelled doom for the peasantry across the country, the Left Front government in West Bengal has continued to extend state support to the small and marginal peasants through provision of subsidised inputs – especially improved seeds and organic fertiliser – and ensuring adequate procurement at fair prices. The daily wage rate for agricultural workers has been increased to Rs. 82. The results can be seen in the steady agricultural growth registered in the state. While agricultural growth rate for the country as a whole in 2008-09 and 2009-10 was 1.6% and 0.2% respectively, agricultural growth in West Bengal in the last two years was 4.4% and 4.2% respectively.

Under the Left Front government, West Bengal has emerged from being a rice deficit state to the topmost producer of rice in the country (148 lakh tonne production in 2009-10). West Bengal also occupies the first position among all Indian states in the production of vegetables and fish. Despite being the highest producer of rice, Central procurement of rice from West Bengal remains to be very low at less than 5% of total central procurement (FCI procurement of rice is concentrated in AP, Punjab and UP). In this backdrop, the Left Front government has stepped up procurement of rice from the farmers at its own initiative from 2007. **In 2009-10, a total of 17.4 lakh tonnes rice was procured and distributed at a subsidised rate of Rs. 2 per kg to 2.64 crore BPL persons in the state.** This year, the state government has decided to further

increase procurement and expand the scope of Rs. 2 per kg rice to the lowest 20% of APL families over and above all BPL families.

Strengthening Panchayats

Besides undertaking such pro-people initiatives in land reforms and agriculture, another major success of the Left Front government has been the decentralization of power and deepening of democracy to the grassroots through the establishment and efficient functioning of panchayats and municipalities. The three-tier panchayat system established in 1977 in West Bengal has achieved successes that is unprecedented elsewhere in the country. **It was a full 16 years after this initiative by the Left Front in West Bengal that the panchayati raj system was adopted for the entire country through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments in 1992-93.**

As a result of successful implementation of panchayati raj, social power has shifted from the rural elite to the rural poor through empowerment of peasants and agricultural workers, mostly belonging to dalit, adivasi and minority households. It is because of this empowerment that regressive practices like untouchability, atrocities against dalits and adivasis and phenomena like khap panchayats – which are still prevalent across the country – are virtually absent in Bengal. **The government has recently implemented 50% reservation for women in panchayats and other local bodies.**

Workers' Rights

Many significant steps have been initiated by the Left Front government for the working class, especially in regard to social security for the workers in the unorganised sector. 17 lakhs unorganised workers have been enrolled in the Provident Fund Scheme till date. The government also provides financial assistance of Rs. 1500 per month to workers of closed factories and tea gardens. Pension of Rs. 1000 per month is paid to old age persons, widows, the disabled, artisans, handloom weavers, farmers and fishermen. **The government has recently extended the Employment Guarantee scheme to the urban poor at a minimum wage of Rs. 100 per day.**

West Bengal has the largest number of functioning small manufacturing units in the country (27 lakhs) as well as the largest

number of employment in them (58 lakhs). 10.4 lakh Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are also functioning in West Bengal today, employing over 1 crore persons. The Government is providing interest subsidy to the SHGs to ensure loans at only 4% interest.

Improvement in Social Indicators

Human Development indicators have also improved in West Bengal under the Left Front government. The infant mortality rate measured per 1,000 live births in 2006 was 38 in West Bengal, compared to the all India rate of 57. Life expectancy has improved considerably in West Bengal to 64.5 years for males and 67.2 for females, compared to the all India average of 61 for males and 62.5 for females. As against the all India average of 7.4 per thousand, the death rate in West Bengal is 6.2. West Bengal has a literacy rate of 72 per cent against the all-India average of 63.4. Nearly 100 per cent of all girls and boys of age six are enrolled in schools and the school drop out rate has fallen considerably. **The government is currently recruiting 60000 primary school teachers in the ongoing year, which will bring down the student teacher ratio and strengthen the primary education system.**

Minority Rights

Steadfast defence of secularism and communal harmony has been the hallmark of the Left Front government in West Bengal. It is a matter of great pride, that West Bengal has remained free from any form of communal violence and riots in the three-decade long rule by the Left. Critics often question the record of the government vis-à-vis minority welfare in view of the findings of the Sachar Committee. However, the Sachar Committee ignored the record of land reforms in West Bengal which greatly benefited the poor Muslims.

The share of cultivable land owned by Muslims in West Bengal is 25.6%, which is the highest in the country after Jammu and Kashmir (which is a Muslim majority state). The Sachar Committee also ignored the fact that the West Bengal government takes the financial responsibility of paying salaries to all Madrasah teachers. The West Bengal Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (WBMDFC) has the best record among all states in disbursing scholarships and loans to the minority students

and youth at subsidised interest. In 2009-10, nearly 3.5 lakh Muslims benefited from the WBMDFC schemes, which is the best record in the country as per the Union Ministry of Minority Affairs. Besides strengthening and modernizing madrasah education, the government has upgraded the famous Calcutta Madrasah (set up by Warren Hastings in 1780) to Aliah University in 2007, which will teach modern subjects like engineering, science, management, physical sciences, humanities, social sciences etc. alongwith Islamic studies. A centre of the Aligarh Muslim University is also being set up in Murshidabad.

The Left Front government in West Bengal has recently decided to implement the recommendations of the Ranganath Mishra Commission Report to grant 10% reservations in jobs for Muslims belonging to OBCs. The process of identification of the OBC Muslim communities has been completed and over 1.4 crore Muslims out of a total of 2.2 crore in the state are being given OBC certificates, which will lead to a big increase in government job opportunities for Muslims.

Trinamul Congress: Destructive Force

While the Left Front government in West Bengal is trying to implement all these pro-people steps and striving to provide an alternative to the exploitative neoliberal order, the anti-Left opposition is hell bent on stalling the progress of the state. The CPI (M) and the Left Front government are acutely aware of their own limitations and shortcomings and are determinedly addressing the issues. The TMC, however, cannot offer any progressive alternative to the programmes and policies of the Left Front. Beneath the veneer of the populist slogan of 'ma, mati, manush', lies the bankrupt ideology of rabid anti-Communism and extreme political opportunism epitomized by the TMC supremo. **One cannot forget that during her earlier stint as a Cabinet Minister in the NDA government, she had sent a bouquet of flowers to greet Narendra Modi for his victory in Gujarat assembly elections in 2002, after the state sponsored carnage of Muslims in the state.**

During her present tenure, she has presided over a spate of railway accidents leading to the loss of precious lives. While 64 persons died in railway accidents across the country in 2009-10, 218 persons have died since April 2010. The Minister has shown no

initiative in filling up nearly two lakh vacancies in the Railways, half of which are in departments connected to safety and maintenance. At the same time in the name of public-private partnership (PPP), railway infrastructure is being privatised and functions of the railways are being outsourced. The interests of the Railways are being sacrificed to meet the narrow political interests of the TMC.

The Union Railway Minister had no qualms in addressing the PCPA-Maoist organised rally in Lalgarh on 9th August 2010, despite the PCPA being directly responsible for the sabotage and derailment of Jnaneshwari Express in Paschim Medinipur on 28th May 2010, which killed 150 innocent persons. After thoroughly exposing her incompetence and opportunism, the Minister is now offering to negotiate between the Central government and the Maoists.

Character of Maoists

Sections of the intelligentsia suffer from illusions regarding the Maoists. The CPI (Maoist) claims its lineage from the naxalite movement of the 1960-70s, which had sought to blindly imitate the Chinese revolution in India by taking up arms against the state and mouthing slogans like "China's Chairman is our Chairman". Following the collapse of the naxalite movement, a large section of the naxalites realised their left adventurist folly and parties like the CPI (ML) Liberation, CPI (ML) New Democracy etc. abandoned armed struggle and joined the parliamentary democratic process. The Maoists in Nepal have also realised the importance of democratic institutions and are today participating in elections and engaging with the process of framing a republican constitution in Nepal.

In contrast, **the Indian Maoists have degenerated, indulging in mindless violence, brutal killings of innocent poor people by labeling them as 'police informers', extorting money from forest contractors and illegal miners and striking deals with corrupt bourgeois politicians for protection and patronage.** While mouthing pseudo-revolutionary slogans, these nihilist anarchists exploit the tribals and prevent democratic mass mobilisation of the tribal people on their just and democratic demands.

In West Bengal, the Maoists have openly allied with the reactionary TMC to target the grassroot activists of the CPI (M) in the tribal populated forest areas of Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia districts. The Maoists alone have killed over 150 CPI (M) activists and sympathisers in these three districts since May 2009, most of whom were poor peasants and agricultural workers from dalit or adivasi households. They had tried to assassinate the West Bengal Chief Minister through a mine blast during his visit to Paschim Medinipur in November 2008.

While conducting security operations against the Maoists, the Left Front government has ensured that innocent people are not harassed or victimized. The government has launched several developmental initiatives in the tribal areas like granting pattas to forest dwelling people, expanding NREGA, opening PDS outlets, providing scholarships for tribal students and promoting tribal language and culture. As a result, the local people are spontaneously resisting the Maoists and cooperating with the security operations. Today the Maoists are on the run with many of their cadres either surrendering or being arrested.

Defend the Left in West Bengal

In the name of 'poriborton' (change) in West Bengal, what the TMC-Maoist combine has to offer is anarchy and socio-economic retrogression. The success of these forces will negate the advances made by the democratic movement and pave the way for the restoration of the earlier forms of exploitative order in West Bengal. **Already, incidents of former landlords attempting to recapture their illegally held land that was acquired and distributed to the landless have occurred in some areas where the TMC has gained foothold.**

The assembly elections in May 2011 in West Bengal will be a major battle between the forces representing the interests of the working people, social justice, secularism and our country's sovereignty and the forces which are representing the interest of the big capitalists, landlords, the rich and vested interests who seek to forge a strategic alliance with US imperialism and who use communalism, ultra-Left anarchy and divisive politics to achieve their objectives.

CPI (M) appeals to all secular, democratic and progressive sections of the country to see through the reactionary and

undemocratic character of the anti-Left opposition in West Bengal, rally behind the Left Front to defend the bastion of the Left in West Bengal and further the left and democratic movement in India.