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The Current Political Situation and the Party's Tasks

It is over two and a half years since the Lok Sabha elections in May 2004. The UPA government has completed the mid-point of its term. How does the political situation look at this juncture? How have the Congress and the BJP fared? What has been the role played by the CPI(M) and the Left? Are there any possibilities for the emergence of a third alternative? These are issues which need to be assessed and conclusions drawn.

The 2004 parliament elections were a setback to the BJP and its allies. After six years of uninterrupted rule, the BJP lost power against its expectations. It is a fact that the ouster of the BJP from the Central government provided timely relief and checked the plans of the BJP-RSS combine to take the country on a Hindutva-based transformation. The unexpectedness of this ouster did cause a degree of disarray in the Sangh combine. How to recover lost ground, preoccupied the BJP leadership. The stepping down of Advani from the Presidentship after his controversial trip to Pakistan, the tightening of the grip of the RSS on the party and the adoption of a strident Hindutva agenda were all part of the process of coming to terms with a loss which was not easy to comprehend and more difficult to overcome. The initial disarray found the BJP unable to even act as an effective opposition to the UPA government. It was unable to adjust to the political environment which centred on the people's well-being and on issues of employment, food, land and the rights of the oppressed sections of society.

But the electoral defeat in 2004 should not be interpreted as a serious erosion of the BJP-RSS combine's base. The BJP lost only 1.8 per cent of vote compared to its 1999 performance. The defeat of the Telugu Desam and the AIADMK in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu respectively were a major cause for the seats tally of the NDA going down to 189. The BJP is running the state governments in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and, till recently, in Jharkhand. It is also part of the BJD-led coalition government in Orissa. After the Lok Sabha elections, it lost the crucial Maharashtra election with its Shiv Sena ally, but it was able to enter governments in two states for the first time – in Bihar with the Janata Dal(U) and in Karnataka with the Janata Dal(S) of Deve Gowda.

Given its strong base in northern and western India and the strengthened network of the RSS which made full use of the six-year period of BJP rule, it will be wrong to see the BJP as a declining force. The proper assessment would be that the BJP was isolated by the Vajpayee government's pro-rich, pro-imperialist and communally disruptive policies. Equally the record of the Chandrababu Naidu government in Andhra Pradesh and the Jayalalithaa government in Tamil Nadu turned the people against the NDA.

The relevance of the verdict of the Lok Sabha polls for the fortunes of the Congress party has to be also understood. Though the Congress

emerged at the head of the ruling alliance, the UPA, it is significant that this electoral success is based on weak foundations. The Congress won 145 seats polling 26.53 per cent of the vote. Its allies brought in 74 seats with 9.1 per cent votes. The verdict, apart from highlighting that both the BJP and Congress got a reduced vote share in 2004 compared to 1999, highlighted the continuing importance of the regional parties whether they were allied to either combination. The success of the DMK, RJD and NCP as allies of the Congress underlines the key role played by such alliances.

The BJP-led government, in its six-year rule, was fully engaged in the rightwing project of transforming the Indian economy on neo-liberal lines, dominated by Indian big business and foreign finance capital. For the first time in India, a ruling party openly celebrated the idea of the rich becoming the superrich. Neo-liberal policies with the emphasis on privatization became the hallmark of the Vajpayee government. In six years, the BJP regime sold off public sector assets and shares which realized a total of over Rs 33,000 crores. This in itself was gross undervaluation of the real value of these assets. The Indian big bourgeoisie and foreign finance capital were delighted at this bonanza.

The neo-liberal policies resulted in massive deflation, i.e. a systematic reduction in public expenditures led to a fall in demand in the economy. The tax-GDP ratio fell due to the cuts in tariffs and the tax concessions to the rich and the corporate sector; interest on public debt was raised and increasing the fiscal deficit was prohibited even though the country had huge food stocks, a large foreign exchange reserve and unutilised industrial capacity. This led to cuts in expenditure by the Centre and the state governments were forced to comply. These cuts were made in social sector expenditure (education, health, etc.), investment and rural development expenditure and cutting subsidies for the poorer sections. Lack of employment opportunities, curtailment of the public distribution system, deterioration in public education and health systems and sharp fall in purchasing power of the rural poor have been the result.

It is the scene of thousands of farmers committing suicide due to the rural distress, millions of young people unemployed and large-scale closure of small-scale industries and destruction of livelihood of those engaged in traditional industries like handloom, coir, artisans and so on which was the dark side of the right-wing economic policies. The BJP made the fatal mistake of assuming that the prosperity and "feel good" of 10 per cent of the population was proof of the success of their economic policies. During BJP rule, the number of crorepati households went up by 26 per cent, according to a study by the NCAER. That is a household with income of one crore rupees or more annually went up to 20,000 between 1996 and 2001. Add to that the number of families with incomes above Rs 10 lakh a year, the total of rich families came to 8 lakhs in 2001 which was expected to go up to 17 lakhs by 2005-06. This was the constituency which benefited from BJP rule.

It is this record, on the one hand, of the rich getting richer with the super-rich getting most of the bounty and, on the other hand, rural distress, hunger deaths, suicides of farmers and mass unemployment which sealed the electoral fate of the BJP.

The second major question thrown up by the BJP's control over Central government was the facilitation of RSS penetration into the State apparatus. Systematic efforts were made to legitimise the communal ideology in official policies, the educational system and the cultural

sphere. This was accompanied by a sharp rise in the attacks and intimidation of minorities, both Muslim and Christian. The danger of the continuance of the BJP rule was highlighted by what happened in Gujarat in 2002 and its aftermath. The instruments of the State getting communalised would have eventually led to disintegrative trends gathering momentum within the country. The Lok Sabha results show that a wide section of the people became conscious of this danger. The type of communal polarisation and frenzy which marked the early years of the 1990s could not be sustained by the RSS combine as more and more people became alienated from such tactics.

The abject pro-US stand of the BJP leadership evoked the disapproval of even sections of the middle classes who had supported the BJP. National pride and sentiments were hurt by repeated gestures of the Vajpayee government acting as a supplicant to the US. Such feelings also contributed to the erosion of support to the BJP.

To sum up, the BJP-led alliance's defeat was due to the combination of all the three factors: (1) the erosion of support and discontent among large sections of people against the harmful economic policies; (2) the communal outlook and disruptive activities of the organisations patronised by the BJP-led government; and (3) the popular perception that the BJP-led government was surrendering India's sovereign rights to America and imperialism.

The two and a half years of the UPA government should be judged on how far it has taken steps to undo the BJP government's legacy and fulfill the people's expectations.

The Common Minimum Programme adopted by the UPA contained, to some measure, the elements for achieving these tasks. It provided some correctives in the following areas: (1) At the political level, steps to check the penetration of the communal forces and ideology in the state and key areas of society. (2) Check some of the worst aspects of the neo-liberal policies which have harmed the working people. (3) Steps to abolish the anti-democratic laws like POTA and correct imbalances in Centre-state relations. (4) To shift away from the Vajpayee government's foreign policy towards a more independent foreign policy.

ATTITUDE TO THE UPA GOVERNMENT

The 18th Congress of the Party, in its Political Resolution, set out the approach to be adopted towards the UPA government.

While the political basis for support to the UPA government is the need to isolate the communal forces and keep them away from government, the Left parties expect the UPA government to base its policies on the Common Minimum Programme adopted by the Congress-led alliance. The CPI(M) will support all the steps in defence of secularism and the implementation of the pro-people measures in the Common Minimum Programme.

The support to the UPA government from outside does not preclude an independent role for the Party. As the 18th Congress Political Resolution stated:

In the present situation the Party has to play an independent role. That role implies criticizing and opposing such steps of the government which are against the people's interests, or are a departure from the CMP and which are

a continuation of the same type of policies as the previous government's. The people should be able to understand that the Party and the Left are not supporting the government for continuing with the same discredited policies of the previous communal and right wing government.

This independent role entails that the Party and the Left conduct political campaigns to project the independent positions of the Left and popular mobilisations and struggles to defend the rights and livelihood of the people. The mass organisations have to play an active role in forging the widest movements both for pressurising the government to implement pro-people measures included in the CMP and to fight against the ill-effects of the continuing policies of liberalisation and the effects of imperialist-driven globalisation.

The independent role of the Party does not mean confining to, or dealing only with the CMP and government related issues. It means taking up the demands of the Left and democratic programme set out by the Party. The issues of land, wages, democratic rights of the working people have to be taken up and struggles conducted. The issues of the basic classes have to be championed and fought for. Not taking up such issues would mean undermining the independent role of the Party and weakening the struggle of the Left and democratic forces.

The Party has been formulating its attitude to the UPA government on the above basis.

The inclination of the Manmohan Singh government has been to push ahead with the neo-liberal policies. The Congress party's orientation towards liberalization is reflected in the pursuit of privatization of various sectors, encouraging foreign financial institutional flows, continuing with the targeted public distribution system instead of a universal one, fiscal policies which constrain public expenditure in the interests of common people by emphasis on reduction of the fiscal deficit.

The efforts to get the pro-people measures in the CMP implemented and the struggle to check the neo-liberal direction of policies have marked the two and a half years of the UPA government. From the start, the UPA government sought to raise the cap on foreign capital in the telecom, banking and insurance sectors. A policy of disinvestment in navaratna and profitable PSUs was drawn up. The Prime Minister himself announced the intention of the government to go in for full capital account convertibility. This was followed by the setting up of the Tarapore Committee whose recommendations are being implemented in a piecemeal fashion. The government employees pension funds are earmarked for privatization. The liberalization of the financial sector is high on the agenda of the government. The push for FDI in retail trade has resulted in it being allowed in single brand category. The SEZ Act and rules are so designed as to provide the big business with a land grab for real estate speculation and a tax bonanza.

The failure of the UPA government to address the basic causes of the agrarian crisis are evident. The continuing farmers' suicides in states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala show that the measures taken by the Government to increase institutional credit are insufficient. The refusal to implement some of the key recommendations of the National Commission for Farmers is due to their going against the neo-liberal prescriptions.

After two years of the UPA government in office, the Central Committee of the Party reviewed the experience and decided that the Party and Left should be more assertive in our positions on policy matters. It stated:

First of all, we should be more assertive in our opposition to the economic policies which go against the interests of the people and the country and those measures which are in violation of the Common Minimum Programme. This opposition be expressed not only in the UPA-Left Coordination Committee but by our conducting campaigns and struggles and by raising them more vigorously in Parliament.

Secondly, we should convey to the Congress leadership in the UPA-Left Coordination Committee that if they insist on going ahead with contentious issues like Iran, airport privatisation, FDI in retail trade, etc., they will have to face opposition not only from outside but inside Parliament too

Thirdly, on several issues like Iran, the Bush visit and the FDI in retail trade, a number of other parties, including some in the UPA, can be rallied to oppose the government's stand. On such issues, we should try to rally all the non-BJP parties on a common platform and also confront the government in Parliament. The message should go that we will not confine ourselves to the UPA-Left coordination framework and that we will forge platforms and alignments with other parties whenever issues come up.

It is this approach that the Party has been pursuing in the subsequent period.

It is only the determined opposition of the Left which stopped the disinvestment of shares in the navaratna companies like BHEL and profitable PSUs. The Left has halted raising of the FDI cap in insurance and the banking sectors. The privatisation of pension funds has also been opposed by the Left. It is also the firm opposition of the Left which has checked the move to fully open up retail trade to FDI. The demand for changes in the SEZ Act and rules are also being spearheaded by the Left in Parliament and outside.

On the other side, without the prodding of the Left, the Rural Employment Guarantee Act in its present form that provides for a minimum of hundred days work to one person in a family in the rural areas would not have come into being. The other major legislation, the tribal and traditional forest dwellers land rights act, would not have been adopted, if not for the Left pressure, and the CPI(M)'s efforts in particular. The prices of petrol and diesel have been reduced to a limited extent because of the Left's continuous demand.

The CPI(M) has maintained that without a substantial increase in public investment for agriculture, the crisis in agriculture cannot be overcome. The Left has mounted a continuing campaign to strengthen the public distribution system and for increased budgetary allocations for education and health.

At the heart of the conflict with the Left on economic policies, lies the UPA's unwillingness to raise resources from big business, foreign capital and the rich to meet its commitments to the poorest sections of society. A stark illustration is the refusal to restore long term capital gains tax on equities that emanates from the fear of offending foreign finance capital and the big speculators.

The UPA government claims the 8 per cent GDP growth as its major success. But this growth rate does not reveal the agrarian crisis which affects the bulk of the people. The rate of growth of agriculture is only 1.5 per cent. It further does not show the sharp rise in inequalities. The profits of the corporate sector have risen sharply in recent years. The net profits of the 1000 top-listed companies rose by 48.8 per cent in 2004-05 over the previous year. Like in the days of BJP rule, the super-rich are getting richer. According to the Forbes Asia, the collective net worth of the 40 richest Indians went up from \$61 billion to \$106 billion between 2004 and 2005. Another survey notes that India registered the second fastest growth of 19.3 per cent in the number of high net worth individuals. This contrasts with the 300 million Indians who earn less than 1 dollar a day. The 8 per cent growth hides the growing social divide and regional disparities.

STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENT POLICY

The CPI(M) considers the departure from an independent foreign policy and the strategic alliance with the United States as the most serious issue with the UPA government. The Military Framework Agreement signed in June 2005, preceded the joint statement issued during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington. The maintenance of close military and security cooperation with Israel is part of this arrangement. This has led to India not taking a firm stance in support of the Palestinian struggle; resiling from its stand on the Iran nuclear issue and failing to oppose the US aggressive moves in West Asia and the world in general. The nuclear cooperation agreement will further bind India to the US side. At the military level, the steps to draw India into the US global strategy continue apace. India and the United States have finalised a Maritime Cooperation Framework and a Logistics Support Agreement. The US continues to pursue India to join the missile defence programme by offering to sell it the Patriot missile system.

The UPA government is not willing to explore the full potential of the trilateral cooperation with Russia and China, work to achieve a breakthrough in relations with China and enhance its participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation given this reliance on the United States.

The CPI(M) has spearheaded the campaign against the military cooperation agreement and in defence of an independent foreign policy. India's vote against Iran in the IAEA was also an issue on which the Left went to the people to mobilize against such surrender to US pressures. In the coming days more popular mobilizations have to be conducted to change the orientation of foreign policy. While it is true that there is a reservoir of anti-imperialist sentiment among the people, there are also impediments in tapping this latent support. The Bush administration's "war against terror" became identified as a war against muslim nations. The continuing occupation of Iraq and the execution of Saddam Hussein has evoked strong feelings and anger among a large number of people, including the Muslim masses in India. The BJP's patent hostility to Muslims and open support to the US and Israel in their aggression against the Arab countries, have opened the way to depict these issues as "Muslim" issues. It is essential therefore, for the CPI(M) and the Left forces to more actively take up anti-imperialist issues and mobilize people across communities.

They have to point to the dangers of India succumbing to US pressures. The Left has to strongly counter the Muslim fundamentalist position of “jihad” against America targeting it as a Christian country.

The pro-US orientation in the foreign policy of the UPA government is a major source of concern. The Party has to firmly oppose the strategic alliance with the US and gather the widest forces to check this relationship.

PROSPECTS FOR THE CONGRESS PARTY

Some of the more perceptive political commentators, analysing the condition of the Congress party after the Lok Sabha elections, had suggested that the future of the party lay in evolving as a Centre-left party. This would be the only way it could retain the mass base that it traditionally commanded drawn from the rural poor, dalits, women, minorities and so on. The last two decades have seen the Congress party go in the reverse direction. Even on the vital question of communalism, the Congress is unable to conduct a sustained political and ideological struggle against the communal forces. More and more, it seeks to outmanoeuvre the BJP in the electoral arena. This results in the ideological basis of the Hindutva appeal remaining untouched.

The 2004 result and the return to government did provide the Congress a historic opportunity to change course. The two and a half years have shown only some weak stirrings in this regard, that too due to the stance of the Congress President on some issues. But the Congress party, given its class character, is unable to break out of the neo-liberal framework which is essential if the problems associated with the one and a half decades of pro-rich and anti-people policies are to be seriously tackled and reversed. It is this record and the impact on the people which will determine the future prospects of the Congress party.

There are two reasons why the Congress is unable to play the role of a Centre-left party. The first is the pursuit of neo-liberal policies that nullify the social democratic features in its programme. The second is the pro-US orientation in foreign policy that detracts from the Congress party's traditional advocacy of a non-aligned foreign policy, which in today's context may be translated as an independent foreign policy. The two factors are inter-connected. The joint statement made during the Prime Minister's visit to Washington in July 2005 signaled the intention to pursue the same policy as that of the previous BJP government. The strategic alliance with the United States has far-reaching consequences. In the Indian context, a Centre-left agenda has to accord importance to protection of national sovereignty by withstanding the pressures of international finance capital. The policies of the Congress-led UPA government detract from such a stance.

AGENDA OF THE BJP-RSS COMBINE

As pointed out earlier, after the initial disarray due to the setback in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has now come out with a clear-cut Hindutva agenda under RSS guidance. The BJP's national council session in Lucknow has harped on the theme of “appeasement of Muslims” with a warning that this can lead to a second partition of India. The presidential address reiterated the RSS agenda of building the Ram temple at

Ayodhya, abolition of Article 370 of the Constitution and the introduction of Uniform Civil Code. Within parliament, the BJP has been mounting attacks on the UPA government on issues such as the compulsory singing of 'vande mataram', the execution of the death sentence on Afzal Guru, one of the accused in the parliament attack case, and the Sachar Committee report on the status of Muslim minorities.

The BJP's rightwing and reactionary politics has come to the fore during this period. The baiting of Muslim minorities, the opposition to dialogue with Pakistan, attempts to raise anti-China feelings on the border dispute combined with an open pro-US stance form part of this platform. The consequences of the rabid communal stand taken by the BJP at the instigation of the RSS can be seen in the incidents of communal violence which have taken place in the recent period. There has been violence in Mangalore and surrounding areas followed later by violence in Bangalore in Karnataka. Communal incidents have taken place in a number of places in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The more recent ones being in Gorakhpur and Jabalpur. There have been instances of provocative acts by Muslim fundamentalist organisations which have provided the basis for the RSS and its outfits to indulge in retaliatory violence. The overall climate of muslim baiting and the targeting of muslims by the State machinery is also helping the extremists to recruit youth from the minority community. The violence in Karnataka is not accidental given the fact that the BJP is now in the state government. Under the BJP-run state governments in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, attacks on Muslim and Christian minorities are regular occurrences.

The terrorist bomb blasts in Mumbai and Malegaon which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives have also been utilized by the BJP-RSS combine against the Muslim community in general.

Given the proximity of the Uttar Pradesh elections and the assembly elections due in Gujarat and other BJP-ruled states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh next year, the game plan of the RSS-BJP combine to raise the communal temperature and create a communal polarisation should not be underestimated. There has to be relentless efforts to mobilize the people against the disruptive activities of the Hindutva brigade. Similarly, efforts have to be made to counter the Muslim fundamentalist groups who seek to prey on the alienation and insecurity amongst the Muslims.

FOR A THIRD ALTERNATIVE

After the collapse of the United Front government in 1998, the CPI(M) had examined the experience of the efforts to forge a third front closely. This critical review dealt with the regional parties and our characterization of their role; the nature of electoral alliances and their relation to the third alternative and the role of the Party and the Left in forging such an alternative. First of all, there had to be a reappraisal of the regional parties. In class terms the regional parties represent the bourgeois-landlord classes of their state. However, as noted in the Updated Programme of the Party, their attitude to the big bourgeoisie and foreign capital has undergone a change in the last two decades with the advent of liberalization. The growth of the regional bourgeoisie with the proliferation of capitalism had led to their growing collaboration and integration with the big bourgeoisie within the capitalist structure. Secondly with

liberalization, the possibilities for collaborating with the foreign capital for the regional bourgeoisie opened up in a big way. At the political level this was mirrored in the changed role of the regional parties. With the advent of coalition governments, the regional parties have the opportunity to be in the Central government by allying with a national level combination. The United Front was in fact a combination of the regional parties with the Left parties.

This changed role also led to the major secular regional parties becoming opportunist towards the BJP. Earlier, they came together with the Left to form the United Front to keep out the BJP from power in 1996. But from 1998 onwards, the parties like the TDP, AIADMK, DMK, AGP and National Conference allied with the BJP to counter the Congress or their main rival in their state and to get a share in the Central government. The complications in building a third alternative was also brought out when the Janata Dal (S) headed by Deve Gowda decided in Karnataka to join hands with the BJP to form a coalition government in early 2006. The tendency of regional parties to ally with the BJP, for the narrow purpose of thwarting their main rival in their state, the Congress, must be taken into account.

After this experience, the relevance of a third alternative had to be reinterpreted and defined. There can be no third alternative unless it is anti-communal and projects alternative policies to those advocated by the Congress and the BJP. This means the working out of a common platform of policies which can underpin the third alternative. Such an alternative cannot be forged through an electoral alliance. The abortive attempt made by Mulayam Singh and Chandrababu Naidu to form a third front on the eve of the assembly elections in Assam, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Kerala in the early part of 2006 underlines this fact.

The CPI(M) therefore has decided to build a third alternative based on a common policy platform. This should emerge by parties and organizations working together for common demands and issues. In the meantime, if there are elections, the temporary election alliances or adjustments that will take place should not be construed to be a third front.

As the 18th Congress pointed out, the formation of a third alternative as a stable formation can only come about when the Left gets further strengthened at the all-India level. The second requirement is a change in the outlook of the regional political parties which are today either with the Congress or the BJP. As far as the economic policies are concerned, most of the regional parties endorsed the policies of liberalisation and privatisation. There has to be a change in the outlook of these parties if a third alternative is to emerge. A key to bringing about such a change is by forging big movements and united struggles that rally the wider sections of the working people.

Some of the regional parties are responding to the popular expectations and mood. The DMK, a partner in the UPA, took some important steps after forming the state government in Tamil Nadu in May 2006. It has implemented the Rs 2 per kilogram of rice for the BPL card holders. It has begun to distribute 2 acres of waste land to landless families in a phased manner. These are contrary to the agenda of the liberalisation policy makers. The TDP has declared it is taking a relook at the policies it implemented while in government and acknowledges the necessity for fashioning pro-people, pro-farmer policies.

These are only some indications. Experience shows that some of the parties are willing to join hands with the Left when they are in the

opposition, but revert to the ruling class policies when in government. That is why the strengthening of the Left and the building of big popular movements become critical.

STRENGTHENING THE PARTY AND THE LEFT

The tasks set out in the 18th Congress—the all-sided struggle against communalism, the fight against the neo-liberal policies, the broad anti-imperialist mobilization and the strengthening of the Left and democratic forces—all require the independent role of the Party and the strengthening of the CPI(M) as an all-India force. The support to the UPA government is part of the first task, but that is insufficient and only a small part of the overall fight against the communal forces. There has to be constant effort to wage a political-ideological struggle against the BJP-RSS combine which is not possible by relying on the Congress.

The increased intervention of the Left and increasing its strength has to be the priority. The campaign on land, food and employment in August-September 2005 and the national August campaign in 2006 helped the Party to take the alternative policies to the people. In the August campaign, 120 Central meetings were organized addressed by Central leaders. It also led to local struggles being launched on these issues in various places. There has been the two month long struggle of the farmers in Ganganagar and Bikaner districts in Rajasthan on the supply of water in October-December 2006. It was met with brutal repression resulting in the death of two persons and injuries to many others. There was a campaign for the all-round development of the districts in Andhra Pradesh by conducting marches in 22 districts over a three year period. On the issuance of BPL cards and implementation of REGA, Party units in various districts in the states have been active in mobilizing the people and conducting struggles. The Party has taken up anti-caste issues in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and some other centers. This needs to be taken up on a wider scale in the Hindi-speaking region. The Khairlanji atrocity and the anger this incident evoked among the dalits, underline the importance of the Party taking up such issues promptly and directly.

The Party was in the lead in taking up anti-imperialist campaigns. On the UPA government's vote on the Iran issue, the Left parties, alongwith the SP and JD(S), conducted a joint campaign. There was widespread observance of the Central Committee's call to hold an anti-imperialist day on 24th January 2006 to express solidarity with the people of Iraq and Palestine and to condemn the US efforts to isolate Iran and blockade Cuba. In West Bengal, on September 1, 2006, 30 lakh people participated in a human chain programme against imperialist aggression. At the call of the CPI(M) Central Committee, the Kerala state committee collected a record Rs 87.45 lakhs and the total collection crossed Rs 1.3 crore.

The period has seen the trade unions and the mass organizations of the peasantry, students, women and youth also taking up the immediate issues of the basic classes and the people. The 14th December general strike called by the sponsoring committee of the Central trade unions, the four kisan sabha jathas culminating in a rally in Delhi in November 2006, the two student jathas and the women's jathas in the states have all facilitated the popularizing of the democratic demands of these sections of people.

In the two years since the Party Congress, some steps have been taken to strengthen the CPI(M). Streamlining the Party organization, work in selected tribal centres, paying attention to the quality of Party membership, cadre policy and correct approach to mass organizations are some of them.

The big victory of the CPI(M) and the Left in the assembly elections in West Bengal and Kerala in May 2006, gave a big boost for Left intervention in national politics. These victories came exactly two years after the Lok Sabha elections and the formation of the UPA government. Apart from the endorsement of the Left Front and LDF platforms in these two states, the verdict was also an appreciation of the role the Party and the Left are playing in the country today. The victory in West Bengal is especially significant. The seventh successive victory and formation of the Left Front government attracted the attention of people in the rest of India. The conventional anti-Marxist gang-up failed to dent the popular support of the Left Front which got 50 per cent of the vote.

The attack on the Left Front government has now assumed a new dimension. The biggest party, the CPI(M), is accused of being pro-capitalist and anti-peasant. The land acquisition in Singur where the Tata car plant is to be situated is being held up as a symbol of the hypocrisy of the Party which opposes the acquisition of land of farmers for SEZs in the country, while its government acquires agricultural land for industries in West Bengal. It is not necessary here to go into the Singur issue and the question of land use in West Bengal. The West Bengal government has formulated a land use policy, which is being published in this issue of *The Marxist*. What needs to be looked into is why the land issue in West Bengal has become a national issue and why many supporters of the Left have taken a stand against the Left Front government's approach.

First of all, there is genuine incomprehension among many Left minded people about the role of a Left-led state government in a situation when the Centre has embraced neo-liberal policies. The economy of a state is inextricably linked up with the national economy. The state governments function within severe constraints made more onerous after the onset of liberalization. It is, therefore, necessary for the Party to conduct a campaign on role of the Left-led governments and the nature of the policies adopted by them. The simplistic notion that the West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura governments can adopt an alternative model to the Centre's policies has to be dispelled. At the most what is possible in the liberalized economy and the neo-liberal framework embraced by the Centre and all the ruling class parties, is to ensure that the state government utilize its limited powers to protect the people's interests and in some spheres try and put in place some alternative policies.

Secondly, in the present environment, it is easy to propagate ultra-Left positions. Such a stance has a natural appeal to sections of the intelligentsia who see the plight of the most exploited and deprived sections being worsened in stark contrast to the wealth and opulence of the super-rich. The ultra-Left attack on the CPI(M) and the Left Front government is not a new phenomenon, but it has acquired a sharper edge after the Singur episode with a band of "social movements" and NGOs joining in. The ultra-Left positions need to be countered politically and ideologically. In the past too, the sectarian naxalite attacks beginning with the United Front governments were firmly refuted by the Party. None of the naxalite groups have come up with anything remotely credible or

realizable regarding what the Left-led state governments should do in the present situation.

The ultimate rebuff to these forces who play into the hands of the anti-Communists will take place when the CPI(M) and the Left are able to resolutely struggle against the ruling classes' policies at the all-India level by mobilising people on a wider scale.

The current situation presents big opportunities for the CPI(M) and the Left to advance. For this, the Party has to wage an all-sided struggle against communalism; lead a determined fight against the growing influence of imperialism; take the initiative for the broader united resistance to the economic policies. The Party, as the biggest contingent of the Left, has to continue to strive to gather other secular and democratic parties for a common platform of alternative policies.

The success of these endeavours is crucially linked to expanding the Party and its organisational strength. The Central Committee of the Party, in September 2006, has made a mid-term review of the organisational tasks set out by the 18th Congress and spelt out the steps needed to fully implement them.