

CAN YOU SHAME INDIA INTO COMMUNISM?

S. A. Dange Turns to "Mass Fasting"

By Kailas Chandra

BOMBAY -- Leaders of the Communist-controlled AITUC [All India Trade Union Confederation] conducted a three-day "mass fasting" (beginning February 20) in important cities and towns "to press their demands which include reduction of prices of essential commodities by at least 25 per cent, further revision of the cost of living index, nationalisation of banking and state trading in food grains." Several hundred leaders of the AITUC all over India, including its president S. S. Mirajkar in Bombay, were among the "hunger strikers."

This "new" strategy of the CPI [Communist party of India], in reality a resort to the old "Gandhian" technique of exercising "moral pressure" on the capitalist class and its state by "self-suffering," in place of the classical weapons of class struggle such as demonstrations and strikes, came as a big surprise to the left movement. A section of the capitalist newspapers saw a "welcome change" in the "red tactics of class war" in favour of more "peaceful and constitutional" methods, although some of them discovered as usual a "sinister" game behind the "strategy."

The call for "mass fasting" is supposed to be the first phase of the AITUC's agitation against rising prices and taxes in the country. The second phase would be mainly demonstrations in front of industrial units on March 7, and the third and last phase would take the form of a "satyagraha" (a token demonstration) before Parliament House in New Delhi on April 6!

Why should the CPI which considers itself the vanguard party of the Indian working-class party resort to such discredited methods of struggle, especially at a time when the working class is prepared for militant action in support of their legitimate demands? Is this because the trade-union movement is so demoralised that it cannot think of strikes and other forms of mass demonstrations? Above all, what is the attitude of Marxists to the weapon of "hunger strikes" in the struggle of the exploited masses? These questions require clarification.

Just as the Marxists condemn "individual terrorism" because it places a premium on the "heroism of an individual" at the cost of the initiative of the masses (apart from the fact that terrorism is invariably used by the ruling capitalist class as a weapon to suppress popular struggles), Marxists also discard the technique of "hunger strikes" (except in extraordinary situations like protests in jails) as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

As acts of individual "self-suffering," "hunger strikes" have the effect of disorganising mass movements, since the initiative passes from the masses in action against capitalism to the "self-suffering" individuals who are supposed to bring "moral pressure" on the exploiting classes. The result is that the masses are disoriented from their real course of conscious collective action which alone can bring about their "socialist liberation."

When capitalism inflicts hunger and starvation on millions of people, there is no reason why the "leaders" of the working class should impose starvation upon themselves! Nor can they expect capitalists to be moved by such token demonstrations of "suffering."

Mahatma Gandhi, as the leader of the national struggle against imperialism, utilised the weapon of "hunger strikes" deliberately as a pressure tactic. His basic objective was to bring pressure on imperialism to win concessions for the bourgeoisie while ensuring that the masses did not seize the initiative and carry the anti-imperialist movements beyond the limits in which he conceived them.

The bourgeois leadership of the national struggle, while seeking mass participation as a pressure weapon against imperialism, was mortally afraid of independent revolutionary action of the masses, which threatened even the indigenous propertied classes. In that context the so-called weapon of "nonviolence" and "individual satyagraha"* and "hunger strikes" had a special meaning as pressure weapons of the national bourgeoisie. Gandhi never hesitated to wind up his anti-imperialist mass struggles (Chouri-Choura shootings by the British police in 1922, Civil Disobedience movement in 1931-33, etc.) when the masses took the initiative in their own hands and transcended the limits imposed by him.

It appears that CPI leader S. A. Dange hopes to play in the working-class movement today the same role which Mahatma Gandhi played in the anti-imperialist movement, the role of a moderator of mass action. This ideally suits the present "class collaborationist" line of the Dangeite leadership of the CPI.

Dange with all his Marxist background knows that any united class action by workers even for their elementary trade-union demands

*"Satyagraha" means literally "Insistence on Truth," but as a part of the Gandhian struggle it assumed the meaning of token defiance of British laws.

has immense revolutionary potentialities in India at the present juncture. The Congress Government which runs a corrupt, backward capitalist state -- despite its protestations of "democratic socialism" -- cannot concede any major demands of the working class, nor can it solve any major problems of the Indian society, whether it be of "spiralling prices," or of raising production, or of a "living wage" for workers.

Whatever "concessions" the capitalists give to the workers in the form of slight increases in cost-of-living allowances or wages paid to workers are quickly overtaken by the rising prices manipulated by capitalist traders.

Fifteen years after independence, an unprecedented economic crisis has overtaken the capitalist economy in India, with its inevitable impact on the political, social, cultural and even moral sphere, a crisis that cannot be resolved within the matrix of a backward capitalist system. Only under systems based on social ownership of the means of production, only a socialist revolution accomplished through politically planned and conscious struggles of the working class and other exploited masses, can combat that crisis and pave the way for future progress.

Dange probably knows this but the limitations imposed on him by the present "class collaborationist" line of the CPI -- dictated again by the exigencies of the Khrushchev leadership trying to "peacefully coexist" with imperialism -- prevents him from launching a programme of bold mass action which alone can bring about a healthy polarisation of class forces in Indian society.

Dange wants to limit struggles of the masses, distort them and put them into a strait jacket of pressure tactics to win minor concessions from the ruling bourgeoisie. That explains his present role as a reformist trade unionist, a virtual saboteur of workers' strikes. The question, however, is how long the rank and file of the CPI, known for their heroic sacrifices in the cause of the working-class movement, are going to tolerate all this Dangeite humbug and stunts in the name of Communism.