

By Kailas Chandra

Bombay

The dismissal of the United Front ministry in West Bengal last November 21 and the installation of a minority government backed by the Congress party created a new situation in the political life of India. Not because the left components of the United Front, including the left-wing CPI(M) [the pro-Peking Communist Party of India (Marxist)], are pursuing a perspective of revolutionary struggle, but because the bourgeois state has begun an offensive against its own parliamentary traditions.

The positive intervention of the masses in protest against the dismissal of the United Front government introduced a further new element into the situation. There was a two-day general strike November 22-23.

The struggle has been continued by students in Calcutta with demonstrations against the new ministry. More than a dozen persons have been killed by the police since November 21 and scores have been injured. Hundreds have been detained under the Preventive Detention Act.

The tense situation in West Bengal took a dramatic turn November 29 when the Legislative Assembly met under the orders of the governor to enable Dr.P.C.Ghosh, the new chief minister, to seek a vote of confidence. The speaker, B.K.Banerjee, a nominee of the United Front, adjourned the House sine die after declaring that the Ghosh ministry was not legally constituted. The governor prorogued the legislature.

On November 30 another general strike was staged in the state in protest.

The political impasse has thus assumed the form of a constitutional wrangle although the Ghosh ministry continues in office with the support of the Congress party but without a formal mandate from the legislature.

The United Front, led by Ajoy Mukherjee, was based on a shaky foundation indeed. It was a fourteen-party coalition\*

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\*The United Front was made up of the left-wing CPI(M), the Bangla Congress, the CPI [pro-Moscow Communist Party of India], the SSP [Samyukta Socialist party], PSP [Praja Socialist party], Socialist Unity Centre, RSPI [Revolutionary Socialist Party of India], Workers party, RCPI [Revolutionary Communist Party of India], Forward Bloc, Forward Bloc (Marxist), Lok

representing disparate class and political interests. A devout Gandhian, Ajoy Mukherjee has never been very happy with his coalition partners, particularly with the left-wing CPI(M) which dominated the United Front not only by its numerical strength, but also by the mass support it commanded outside the legislature.

The peasant uprising in Naxalbari and the growing resistance of workers in Calcutta and other industrial centres (the so-called Gherao movement launched by industrial workers) created an atmosphere in which Ajoy Mukherjee was finding it uncomfortable to continue as chief minister. In October, he conspired with the central government to resign his post and form a "non-Communist ministry" supported by the Congress government. The Centre was prepared to move in the army to take charge of the state administration.

But, sensing a mass uprising would occur, Mukherjee decided not to precipitate a crisis and did not submit his resignation. In a statement which he had prepared for the occasion (and which was released by the Congress party leader P.C.Sen after Mukherjee's ministry had been dismissed), Mukherjee said that his resignation was intended to forestall a move by the left Communists "to create a Vietnam in West Bengal and other eastern states of India, with Chinese assistance"!

The CPI(M), of course, assured Mukherjee that it would not undertake any step that would embarrass him. The party leadership expelled the Naxalbari "extremists" and called off the "Gherao" movement. They also sought an agreement with the employers. A class truce was declared. But that did not save the United Front ministry after all.

The resignation of Dr.P.C.Ghosh as food minister in the United Front ministry and the defection of seventeen legislators\* from the United Front only continued the process initiated by Ajoy Muk-

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Sevak Sangh, and two independent groupings. The Bangla Congress recently merged with the Bharatiya Kranti Dal, an All-India party formed by dissident Congressmen not long ago.

\*The defectors were independents and some members of Ajoy Mukherjee's Bangla Congress and the Praja Socialist party. Dr. Ghosh was elected as an independent supported by the United Front.

herjee himself. The Congress leadership fully backed the defectors.

The defections significantly came at a time when the United Front government was planning to launch a vigorous food grain procurement drive at the end of the present harvesting season, reported to be quite good.

The United Front government was also compelled to act against the Jotedars [landlords] under the pressure of the peasant struggles in the districts. The Jotedars and rich peasants were naturally perturbed about the intentions of the United Front government and were anxious to get rid of it as quickly as possible.

The defections helped the central government to manoeuvre the dismissal of the United Front ministry through the instrument of the state governor, who gave the Assembly a chance to meet formally and decide whether Ajoy Mukherjee commanded a majority in the house.

The United Front government had the support of 153 members as against 127 Congress members in the Assembly. The defections reduced the United Front to a minority party in the 280-member House. The United Front government could have tested its strength immediately after the defections were announced instead of fixing the distant date of December 18 for the meeting. Obviously the United Front leaders were bidding for time under the illusion that some of the defectors might change their minds under popular pressure. This gave an additional pretext for Governor Dharma Vira, a ruthless bureaucrat, to act immediately on orders from New Delhi.

The left constituents of the United Front, including the CPI(M), are anxious, it would seem, to find a constitutional solution of the present situation. Their manoeuvre is to seek the removal of the P.C.Ghosh ministry and the promulgation of president's rule so as to compel the holding of midterm elections.

The CPI(M) demanded a midterm poll for some time but the other members of the United Front opposed this because of their fear that they might be reduced to nonentities in the balloting. Now that the central government has resolved their predicament, the United Front has announced a programme of "civil disobedience," beginning December 18 in support of the demand for a midterm poll.

The left parties in West Bengal who threatened a "blood bath" if the central government dismissed the United Front ministry appear to have become reconciled to the reality that the mass reaction to their general strike calls of-

ferred "no ground for complacency or self-congratulation."

"If anything," the left weekly Now of Calcutta, a critical supporter of the United Front ministry, wrote December 11, "The absence of an organised response should make them ashamed of their uncertain leadership."

It added: "The strike call last week did not go unheeded, but the pattern of response also showed the weakness of Leftist organisation among industrial labour and the rural people."

Now, in fact, blamed the CPI(M) for utilising the "instruments of parliamentary democracy" at the "expense of its mass base" and asked the left parties to give up their "barren and harmful exercise" of hatching united fronts with bourgeois parties.

But the left parties in West Bengal, more particularly the CPI(M), do not seem to have realised the folly of perpetrating multiclass coalitions.

Indeed, the CPI(M), the largest constituent of the United Front, was sharply split on its future course of action in West Bengal. The correspondent of the Times of India, Shankar Ghosh (a former member of the CPI), in a December 3 dispatch, made a revealing assessment of the developments inside the CPI(M) in the state.

During its nine months in office, he states, the CPI(M) trebled in size while its nearest rival, the Bangla Congress (now the Bharatiya Kranti Dal) "had practically been erased as a major political force." The only other party to have strengthened itself in this time was the Socialist Unity Centre led by the former Labour Minister Subodh Banerjee, again a close ally of the CPI(M).

About the inner party conflicts in the CPI(M), he reported: "The extremists had all along been opposed to the party's participation in the Ministry, and the record of the U.F.Government had only strengthened their case. But to break from the U.F. and come out of the Government for any reason would have been construed as surrender of the party leadership to the extremist rank and file. The dismissal of the Ministry came, therefore, as a deliverance to the CPI(M) leaders, though they had to simulate anger to remain in step with the other constituents of the U.F. The extremists were gaining ground rapidly in the party and the CPI(M)'s indefinite continuance in the U.F.Government would have soon threatened the present leadership."

(The so-called "extremists" are in themselves a heterogeneous group, an

important section of them being pro-Maoists who stress the need to develop armed struggle of the rural poor in accordance with Lin Piao's theory of "people's war." Some of them, expelled from the CPI(M), held an "all-India" conference at Calcutta early in November to explore the possibility of forming a new party, but they decided to postpone the decision in view of political differences among the participants.)

But, according to the Times of India correspondent, it is the inner conflict "which is holding back the leadership of the CPI(M) from getting intimately involved in agitated activities." The "extremists" are reportedly in control of the party's underground apparatus and the leadership is not sure that it would be available in the event of a serious clash with the government. The predicament of the CPI(M) in West Bengal, it would appear, was known to the authorities. In assessing the possible repercussions of dismissing the United Front ministry, they "ruled out prolonged disturbances on a large scale." Events since November 21, according to the same correspondent, have proved that the assessment was correct.

The ouster of the United Front ministry in West Bengal has also caused a major revolt among the second-rank leaders inside the pro-Moscow CPI. They are criticising the party's participation in "united fronts" with bourgeois parties in different states. A call was also made to change the present Dangeite leadership of the CPI.

A national conference of the party is scheduled to be held in February to discuss policy regarding "united fronts." Meanwhile the Dangeite leadership has secured majority support for its line in the Central Executive of the party.

The CPI has withdrawn its two ministers from the United Front government in Uttar Pradesh (dominated by dissident Congressmen and Jan Sangh) but is still participating in the coalition government in Bihar where the president of the Bha-

ratiya Kranti Dal is chief minister. The Bihar ministry also faces the prospect of being toppled because of defections from the ruling "United Front."

New Delhi's action in West Bengal was synchronised with the dissolution of the state legislature and imposition of president's rule in the state of Haryana (where a coalition government led by a dissident Congress leader had several defections from its ranks) and dismissal of another "United Front" government and installation of a minority ministry formed by defectors from the ruling party with the support of the Congress party in the state of Punjab. Thus, temporarily at least, the Congress party appears to be "regaining" its position, lost during and after the last general elections.

The dismissal of the United Front ministry in West Bengal assumed special significance because of the predominant role played by the traditional left parties in it. Although the ministry functioned as a loyal defender of private property within the bourgeois order, India's rulers were apprehensive that it might overstep the constitutional limits under pressure from the masses.

The Centre's action in West Bengal therefore serves to expose the parliamentary illusions of the traditional left parties. It also demonstrates once again that the bourgeois state will not hesitate to liquidate its own parliamentary institutions and traditions whenever the class rule of the capitalist state is threatened. The opportunist class collaborationist "united front" politics of the traditional left have greatly helped the bourgeois Centre to masquerade its antidemocratic action as a step to defend "parliamentary democracy."

The big question is whether the working-class parties -- particularly the CPI(M) -- will draw suitable lessons from the developments in West Bengal and embark upon a programme of militant mass action against the bourgeois state in India.