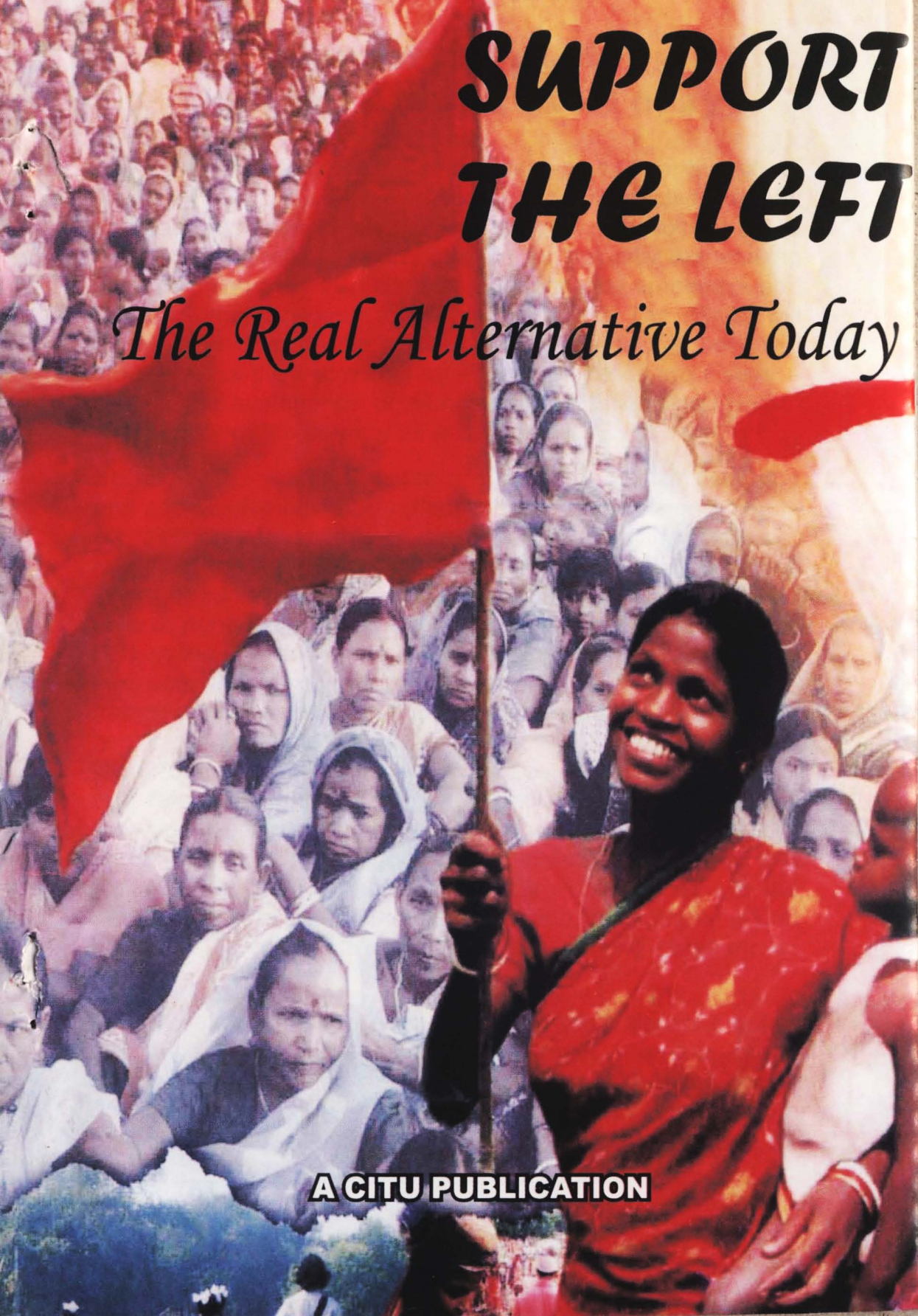




SUPPORT THE LEFT

The Real Alternative Today

A CITU PUBLICATION

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This April-May, West Bengal and Kerala, now under the rule of the Left Front and Left & Democratic Front respectively will be going for assembly elections. The assembly elections in these two states are of crucial importance for not only the working class but also the ruling classes, the corporate employers and the landlords, obviously for different reasons. The results will have implications for the working people, not only of those two states, but of the entire country. These elections are also crucial for the sustenance of democratic institutions and democratic polity of the country as a whole.

So far as the working people are concerned, their demands and aspirations inevitably reflect with the Left's vision on society, economy and rights of the people. In fact the basic demands of the working people – the right to work, living wages, social security and trade union rights - raised by whichever unions, right, left or centre, do basically reflect the vision of the Left on the role and rights of the working people in the society and economy. And as is the experience in general, the demands of the workers both on their rights and the politico- economic policy regime are always raised and asserted in the political forums mainly by the Left parties. The Left parties not only raise their voice in support of the demands and rights of the working people, but also take to the streets and fight shoulder to shoulder in defence of the workers' rights and livelihood and for asserting their demands. Therefore Left parties are the natural allies of the working people and strengthening Left forces is the foremost task before the working class movement.

On the other hand, the forthcoming assembly elections in two Left ruled states – West Bengal and Kerala – are also of supreme importance for the anti-left forces ruling at the centre and the major non-left opposition that basically represent the landlords and capitalist class. That is precisely the reason for

their hell bent efforts for forging a gang up of all right reactionary forces and all hues of anarchist, extremist and disruptive elements against the Left forces. And that is the reason for the malicious onslaught and venomous campaign against the Left and the Left ruled governments in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura unleashed by the capitalist controlled media, both print and electronic. International Finance Capital and the imperialist agencies are not sitting idle either. They are also proactively involved in the anti-Left tirade through all their agencies.

This is because it is only the Left forces that are standing in their way of aggressive pursuit of the imperialist-piloted neoliberal economic policy regime based on loot and plunder of the mass of the people and enriching the richer class. It is the Left forces alone that have consistently been opposing privatisation of public utility services like water, electricity, education, health care et al on which majority of populace and the poor in particular depend and survive. It is again the Left forces alone that are opposing and trying with all their might to stall deregulation of the financial sector, the banks and insurance in particular. It is only the Left forces that have been strongly opposing deregulation and market pricing of essential commodities like food, fuel and fertilisers and insisting on subsidised supply of those commodities to majority of the populace.

What would have happened if the Left parties had not led a sustained struggle against the anti people neoliberal policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation since 1991 backed by countrywide movement of the working class seeking to blockade the neoliberal policy drive at every stage, both nationally and sectorally? By this time, no public sector industries covering crucial sectors like electricity, coal, petroleum, port & dock, banks and insurance, defence industries, Airlines, Minerals etc would have been in existence. Entire Public Distribution system, in whatever messy form it exists on date, would have been totally dismantled. As a corollary to that, the very system of food grain procurement by the government through agencies like Food Corporation of India would have been vanquished and the entire small and marginal peasant population

would have been totally thrown at the mercy of the market and money-lenders. All essential public utilities like water, education, health-care etc would have been thrown wholly at the mercy of the market, fleecing the mass of impoverished people more barbarously. And the workers' movement which is the only social force to maintain continuity in its active opposition to all these anti-people policies would have been completely stripped of all its rights to organise and fight. Workplaces would have been governed by the service conditions of virtual slavery as all the labour related laws would have been targeted for complete overhauling favouring the employers. And once, the rights of the working class are completely clipped, the entire democratic system would have been put in complete jeopardy.

One may well imagine, what could have been the situation for the workers in general, if the labour laws were totally changed in favour of the employers through introduction of hire & fire or banning of right to strike. It could have brought down severe onslaught on the entire trade union movement of all affiliations besides enslaving the toiling people in a big way and that would also affect the democratic institutions as a whole. The labour laws could not yet be changed in that direction because the trade union movement is united in opposing such nefarious designs and the Left forces stood firmly in their support at the political forums.

No doubt neoliberal policy regime, to the extent it could make headway in the national economy, brought miseries to the mass of the people. But life would have been more miserable and agonising for the majority millions had there not been continuity in the working class struggles, had there not been consistent voicing of the peoples' concern and determined opposition to neoliberal policies by the Left forces at the political level. Not only that; due to the consistent and determined opposition of the Left forces alone, the neoliberal policy regime of the existing capitalist-landlord combine could not yet fully culminate in making the country's governance fully subservient to imperialist interest, which otherwise would have been the natural destination of the ruling class fully wedded to neo-liberalism.

And again it is the Left parties who fought hard to force upon the government legislations like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Forest Tribal Rights Act, Right to Information Act, all of which militate against their own policy of neo-liberalism. Were the UPA I government not been dependent for its survival on the support of the Left parties, these pro-people rights-based legislation would have never seen the light of the day.

There is a consistent effort to completely hijack the entire system and machinery of governance by the foreign and domestic corporates and it is the Left forces alone who stood firmly in the way of that disastrous process. Hence it is the Left forces alone which are seen as the villain by the votaries of capitalist-landlord combine ruling the country and also by the imperialist forces seeking to fully subjugate the economy, market and governance of our country, a major developing country in the world. Weakening and marginalising the Left have been the long cherished targets by the capitalist and landlord classes with the imperialists making a common cause with them.

For the favourite project of the capitalist-landlord combine and their imperialist bosses to marginalise Left in the national political scenario to succeed, they have to weaken and marginalise Left in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. And these three states being the strongest centres of the Left, the tirade is concentrated there through an unholy ominous up of all the bourgeois political outfits including the bourgeois media, a section of selected so called intellectuals with liberal gratification from various agencies, both government and non government etc. These are engaged in abusing the Left and its ideology in various forms and different angles, simultaneously from extreme right and ultra Left angles. Added to this is the physical attack to eliminate the Left activists in West Bengal and terrorise common people to make them passive and muted.

These three Left ruled states continue to remain the strongest bastions of the Left contributing to the decisive intervening capacity of the Left forces in the Parliament and national political forums. This intervening and deterrent capacity is crucial

for defending the national economy from the imperialist grip, saving the country's national assets and resources from the greedy international finance capital, for building resistance to capitulation by the ruling polity to US imperialist's politico-economic hegemonic strategy and for defending the rights of the toiling people thereby defending democracy as such.

The forthcoming assembly elections in West Bengal and Kerala are thus just not a routine periodic exercise to decide who will be forming the next state governments there but also to decide which direction the politico-economic events in the country will unfold. Behind the conflict surfaced by the assembly elections in these two states, is underlined the conflict of two distinct trends —the neoliberal's hell bent bid for a push toward more right-wing direction to ultimately jump into the bandwagon of the imperialist agencies on the one hand and the determined opposition by the Left and progressive forces to halt such a rightward sift. The one means surrender to imperialist forces and attendant erosion of the rights of the people in favour of the interests of big business, both domestic and foreign, the other means strengthening the opposition to the machinations for complete destruction of the concept of welfare, democracy and rights of the people and making them retreat.

❖ **What has the Left achieved in the states where it has been voted to power?**

- In terms of NSDP (Net State Domestic Product), West Bengal ranks 3rd, Kerala ranks 10th.
- In terms of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), West Bengal ranks 5th, Kerala ranks 10th.
- In terms of HDI (Human Development Index), Kerala ranks 1st, West Bengal ranks 8th.
- In terms of SDI (Social Development Index), Kerala ranks 2nd, West Bengal ranks 8th.

(In HDI, factors like life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education, GDP per capita etc. are taken into account)

(SDI is an in depth evaluation of development, wherein, indicators like demographic indicator, health care, basic amenities, education, economic and social deprivation etc are taken into account. In all these social indicators the left ruled states are above the Indian average.)

❖ Land Reforms

Under the Indian Constitution, states have been granted the powers to enact (and implement) land reforms, to effectively overhaul the existing feudal land structures and thus bring in a meaningful social change. After 60 years of independence, it is only the left ruled states which have been truthful to the Indian Constitution. The land reforms and land redistribution schemes in all the left governed states are exemplary instances of social and economic upliftment of the vast majority of the populace who lived in pathetic conditions. The implementation of these schemes has been widely acclaimed not only in India but all over the world as text book examples of participatory development.

The total agricultural land distributed in West Bengal amounted to over 11.28 lakh acres up to February 2010. Over 30.1 lakh farmers have benefited from the land reforms programme; 37 per cent of them belong to the scheduled castes, 18 per cent to the scheduled tribes, and almost 18 per cent to the minority households. With a view to empowering women, 6.15 lakh joint pattas and 1.62 lakh female pattas have been distributed.

By registering of sharecroppers (Operation Barga), which forms an important component of the land reforms, another 15.13 lakh farmers have benefited. The land reforms initiative has ensured that 84 per cent of agricultural land in West Bengal is owned by small and marginal peasants.

In Kerala, about 28 lakhs tenants were conferred ownership rights (or had their rights protected) and about 15 lakhs acres of land accrued to them, when the LDF Government were in power, pioneered by first Communist Government in 1957.

During the present tenure of the LDF Govt, land has been given to nearly one and half lakh families which include 12,112

adivasi families. The Govt also took strict action against illegal occupation of land by big corporates.

A significant number of landless agricultural workers received ownership rights over homestead plots. About 528,000 households were issued homestead ownership certificates during this period.

❖ Agriculture

- Since the Left Front came into office in 1977, food grains production in West Bengal has grown at the rate of 6% per annum, which is the highest among seventeen most populous States of India. From a food deficit state witnessing famines and food riots during the Congress rule, West Bengal has emerged as a leading food producer in the country under the Left Front rule.

- West Bengal has emerged as the topmost producer of rice, vegetables and fish among all Indian States. This has been achieved through significant expansion of irrigated land area through small and minor irrigation projects.

- Water for irrigation is the cheapest in West Bengal at Rs 37 per hectare compared to Rs 156 to Rs 267 per hectare in the rest of the states of the country.

- In Kerala the farmer suicides which were around 1500 during the previous UDF regime was reduced to almost nil in the present LDF regime, whereas suicides still continue in other states.

- LDF government in Kerala set up a Debt Relief Commission in 2007 itself to provide relief for indebted farmers. 42113 peasants were relieved from debt trap. Under the food security to programme, 15000 hectares of fallow land has been brought under rice cultivation and additional production of 1.25 lakh tons paddy was achieved. Procurement price of paddy was hiked from Rs. 7 per Kg to Rs. 17 per Kg, highest in the country. Fishermen's Debt Relief Commission has also been set up by the LDF Govt to give relief to the fishermen in the state.

The ambit of the labour department has been extended to community development block level to facilitate enrolment of the unorganised sector workers in the numerous social security schemes and enjoy their benefits as well as to provide for effective resolution of disputes between employers and employees in the informal sector.

Construction: The West Bengal building and other construction workers' welfare board extends a bunch of facilities to the unorganised construction workers within the age group of 18 to 60 years. The construction workers may enroll in the scheme by paying a monthly contribution of Rs 20 only. The worker will get back the accrued amount on attainment of 60 years of age. A financial assistance of Rs 200000 will be extended to the family of the worker in case of premature death. Monthly pension of Rs 500 to Rs 870 as the case may be, will be paid to the worker in case of permanent incapacity to work. Financial help is also be given for medical treatment to the workers and his / her children. The worker is entitled to get up to Rs 50000 as house building loan.

The children (not more than two of a particular worker) will enjoy the benefits of scholarship (from class IX to the highest level of formal education). Financial assistance for the marriage of daughters etc is also available.

Transport: Under the scheme each worker will get a monthly pension on retirement at 60 years of age till death. But in case of disability of permanent nature caused by an accident, the worker will be entitled to get the pension since the occurrence of the accident. Apart from this, in case of accidental death, the family of the worker will receive Rs one lakh as financial assistance. Any transport worker may avail of this scheme by paying Rs 30 a year.

Other facilities and support provided by this scheme include: Rs 50000 for permanent disability; Rs 25000 for partial disability; Rs 10000 for treatment of diseases like tuberculosis, cancer, leprosy, cardiac problems, renal disorders, AIDS, Thalassaemia etc; Rs 30000 for surgical purpose, Rs 3000 as

maternity assistance (maximum two times); educational assistance of Rs 2000 for children in higher secondary level, Rs 3000 for graduation, Rs 5000 for post graduate and Rs 10000 for studies either engineering or medical, Rs 5000 as assistance for marriage of their daughters; Rs 30000 as a financial assistance for normal death of the worker.

Beedi: The state government has come forward with programmes of installing domestic power-connections at the workers' residences and assisting in building their houses. At present, the Beedi Board provides Rs 30000 for construction of houses for its beneficiaries. But the workers concerned have to pay Rs 10000. Again for electrical connection, a beedi worker has to pay Rs 2500. The state government now is contributing to the workers share of Rs 10000 and Rs 2500 respectively for the workers. The state government also pays Rs 10000 to each of the member of a cooperative housing scheme for infrastructure development like drinking water, roads, sanitation etc.

Provident Fund (PF) for unorganised workers: This scheme is being implemented since 2001 by the West Bengal Unorganised Workers' Welfare Board under the labour department, government of West Bengal. Workers within the age group of 18-60 years and engaged in 61 different services or are self employed come under the purview of the scheme. The plan of the scheme envisages a contribution of Rs 20 by the worker and the same amount along with the interest accrued on the total amount by the state government. The whole amount, contributed by the worker and the state government as well as the interest on the total amount is paid to the concerned worker at 60. The nominee gets the amount in case of premature death of the workers. Workers with a personal income of less than Rs 6500 per month are eligible for the scheme. The total contribution of a worker who joins the scheme at 18 and continues up to 60 years will be Rs 10,080 whereas at the time of retirement, he will get back Rs 150000 (including the state government's contribution. This is unique in the whole country.

Kerala

In Kerala, at present the government is providing food grains at Rs 2 per kg to 35 lakh families by bringing the workers of the unorganised sector into the ambit of the BPL category. Under the cooperative network, more than 50000 retail outlets have been arranged for sale of essential commodities at prices ranging from 15 to 45 per cent less than the open market.

- The state is a pioneer in providing social welfare benefits to the unorganised sector workers. The state labour department administers 15 welfare fund boards and five welfare schemes for agricultural workers, workers of construction, cashew, abgari, headload, beedi, transport, tailors, handloom, washermen, auto-rickshaw, toddy, barber etc. Kerala Shops & Commercial Establishment Welfare Board established by the present LDF Govt in 2007 covers more than 15 lakh workers who are not covered by any other welfare fund/schemes. LDF Government aims at bringing the entire workforce under one or other welfare scheme. The monthly pension under these welfare boards was increased from Rs 110 – 120 to Rs 400.
- Revision of minimum wages to various sections of workers is another area where LDF Government focussed its attention. Accordingly government reconstituted the Minimum Wages Advisory Board. Minimum wages were either revised or are in the process of revision in 70 sectors. These sectors include plantation and cashew where a considerable section of traditional workers are engaged.
- A new Migrant Labour Welfare scheme aimed at those coming from other states has been started.
- The implementation of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) is vested with the state labour department. The scheme is being implemented in the state by integrating the same with the Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme (CHIS) so as to provide the benefit to more sections of people. In addition to those families who have been declared BPL by the government of India, the benefits were extended to another 25 lakhs families also treating them as BPL. Thus the schemewould

benefit 35 lakhs of families. The premium in respect of those additional families is being paid by the state government. Besides, the benefits were extended to those APL families as well who are willing to pay the premium. A notable feature of the scheme is a provision that was introduced this year for giving additional benefits of Rs. 70000 for treatment of serious ailments like heart disease, kidney disease, cancer etc to these 35 lakhs of families.

- Cashew industry is one of the most important traditional industries of Kerala. This industry employs more than 3 lakhs workers, 98% of whom are women hailing from the lower strata of the society especially SC/ST communities. The industry forms the back bone of the economy of Kollam and adjoining districts. No doubt, the cashew industry has almost regained its past glory. Gone are the days of unemployment and starvation among the cashews workers. The state owned cashew development corporations and CAPEX provided employment of 284 days and 260 days respectively during 2010-11. Minimum wages have also been ensured to the workers besides enhanced rates of bonus. One of the major problems confronting the cashew industry is the shortages of raw cashew nuts as a result of which the industry has to depend on imports. In order to overcome this difficulty, the LDF Government has constituted an agency by name 'Kerala State Agency for the Expansion of Cashew Cultivation (KSACC)'. Under the auspicious of the agency, large scale cashew cultivation has been started. The state government has already approached the government of India for setting up of a cashew board with headquarters at Kollam for the overall development of the cashew industry. The state government provided Rs 221.19 crores as budgetary support to the cashew industry in the past 4 years

- Rs 350 crores have been allotted to provide debt relief to the fishers, benefiting 1.25 lakhs fishers in the state; interest free loans have been given to 38000 fisher women Workers in other traditional industries like handloom, coir etc too got continuous support from the LDF government

❖ Self Help Groups (SHG):

West Bengal: The total number of SHGs in West Bengal reached 3.8 lakhs in 2005-06, involving nearly 38 lakh persons, 90% of whom are women. This has opened up new possibilities for self-employment and women's empowerment. When the seventh Left Front government assumed office in 2006, a dedicated Ministry to provide policy support to these SHGs was created.

Kerala: The LDF Government in Kerala has brought all Self-Help Groups attached to various departments under LSGIs which ensured development centred on women's empowerment and self reliance through the Kudumbashree — a poverty eradication mission which is a real alternative to the World Bank model of SHGs.

❖ Pro-poor Measures by Left Governments

- 3.5 lakhs houses have been constructed till now in Kerala under the EMS housing scheme; the state government aims to provide house sites and houses to all landless and houseless families under the BPL category. 120300 pattas for house sites were given during the first 4 years of the present government
- The LDF government in Kerala provided a major fiscal stimulus package in its budget which amounts to more than Rs 10000 crore and which is 5 per cent of the gross state domestic product. This expenditure includes Rs 5000 crore for water supply, irrigation and public works. While another Rs 5000 crore is for housing scheme for the more vulnerable sections of the society.
- West Bengal's fiscal package earmarked more than Rs 5000 crore for housing schemes for BPL and low income groups in rural and urban areas; special subsidy for supplying rice at Rs 2 per kg for BPL and Antyodaya beneficiaries; interest subsidies for bringing down interest rate to 4 per cent for self help groups and for agriculture and rural electrification.
- The emphasis of both these packages is on public expenditure driven relief and efforts at absorbing job loss and new employment generation.

- Workers in the closed establishments in West Bengal are paid Rs 1500 per month by the Left Front government; no other state government has such a scheme to help the workers who are thrown out of employment.
- The Kerala Recognition of Trade Union Act is an epoch making legislation, the object of which is the streamlining of the functioning of Trade Unions. Besides preventing the multiplicity of Trade Unions, the Act aims at enhancing the bargaining power of the workers. The LDF government has also set up the Non-Keralites Residents Welfare Board, which is a long-standing demand of the lakhs of Keralites who work abroad and in other parts of the Country.

What is at Stake?

In the above context we should take note of the role of Left ruled governments in these two states which clearly demonstrates the difference between the Left ruled and non-Left Governments in terms of priorities. This also reflects the conflicts between two visions — one, of the Left, for the common people and the other for handful of capitalist class and landlords. Left demarcates form others in its priorities—in favour of the common people, to empower them and prepare them to fight both individually and collectively against the onslaught of capitalist system.

It is clear that democratic and trade union rights are guaranteed only under the Left led governments. The entirely opposite approach of the government of India and also various other state governments on these fundamental issues marks the importance of the Left led governments. The way the capitalist forces and other reactionaries are grouping together today, to weaken the Left led governments, needs to be understood by the working people; the working class has to take the lead in thoroughly defeating these attempts. With the deepening crisis, the working people will have to intensify their struggles. The Left is the only force consistently supporting the demands and struggles of the working people.

What is at stake in these elections, not only for the workers in

West Bengal and Kerala, but for the entire 46 crores workforce in the country, is their basic rights – the inalienable rights of the working class, won through decades of hard struggles and immense sacrifices. The right

- To form and join the trade unions of their choice at every work place
- To oppose the 'hire and fire' policy, contractorisation, outsourcing through united trade union struggles
- To ensure and expand social security schemes to all the workers
- To oppose market pricing of food, fuel and other essential commodities.
- To stop privatisation of public assets and natural resources.

It is only the Left parties that are committed in thought and deed, to support the struggles of the working class to protect these rights.

So far as the peoples' welfare and rights are concerned, Left parties and Left led governments pursue the rights based approach since they believe that the common people have basic fundamental rights that must be protected; that providing such protection and welfare is the responsibility and obligation of any democratic government worth its name. In a democracy, people elect the government and the elected government must be loyal to the peoples' rights and interests and not to a handful of the corporates. It is this vision and approach that demarcates the Left led governments from all the other governments.

At this crucial juncture, the working class movement must take upon itself the task of strengthening Left in the forthcoming battle between the reactionary forces on one side and the Left forces on the other, in the assembly elections of West Bengal and Kerala. Not doing so will tantamount to betrayal to the class. The battle must be conceived as the fiercest class struggle aimed to defeat the extreme right reaction and imperialist manoeuvring in Indian soil thereby defending the working class, the toiling people and the country as a whole. CITU calls upon all its units and activists to join the battle with all seriousness.

March 2011

Price: Rs. 5/-

Published by:
TAPAN SEN
for the Centre of Indian Trade Unions,
B T R Bhawan, 13-A, Rouse Avenue, New Delhi - 110002

Printed at:
Progressive Printers,
A-21 Jhilmil Industrial Area,
Shahdara, Delhi-95