

India

KERALA UNDER A "COMMUNIST" GOVERNMENT

Eleven years ago the British imperialists turned over the power in India to the Indian National Congress, which had won a majority in the previous year's elections. Ministries were formed in the various "states" composing India. But the Congress, representing the weak native bourgeoisie of a backward country, lost ground in the 1952 and 1957 elections.

This defeat was most severe in Kerala. In 1949 the Congress had won the majority in Travancore-Cochin State. In 1952, however, having lost the majority, it had to form a coalition government there with rightist groups. The State of Kerala was formed from this Travancore-Cochin State and the region of Malabar, where the Congress was particularly weak.

The Communist Party of Kerala, next strongest to the Congress in this state, had hundreds of paid full-timers, three daily newspapers (other, bourgeois, papers also supported it), a certain number of weeklies, and considerable funds. In its election manifesto it promised wage increases of 25 %, bonuses of 12.5 %, job security, the elimination of unemployment and poverty, the land to those who tilled it, and a reduction in rents. It added also the nationalization of forests and foreign-owned estates.

In the 1957 elections 162 seats were at stake. Of the 100 that it contested, the C P won 60, with 2,059,548 votes (about 34 % of the total). The Congress, which ran 124 candidates, elected only 43. The Praja Socialist Party and the Moslem League each won nine. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, which had had nine seats in the previous Assembly and which put forward a more revolutionary programme than the C P's, lost all its seats in the C P sweep.

With the aid of five of the six independents elected, the C P formed a government on April 5th 1957.

To understand its subsequent behavior, it is perhaps useful to point out the social composition of the Indian C P, as reflected by the announcement of the Mandates Commission of its Amritsar Conference in April 1958, which indicated that of the 474 delegates, 58 only were industrial or agricultural workers, the remainder being small peasant proprietors or small businessmen.

The new Kerala government carried on in a completely bourgeois fashion. The budgets it presented resembled those of the other Indian states. The laws it introduced were timid and not seriously fought for. A draft law concerning education, for example, was mildly progressive (job-security for teachers, payment of their salaries directly to them, a lessening of the powers of the directors of educational institutions, the possibility for the government to take over private schools, and to improve the level of teaching). But the Catholic reaction, which possessed about one-third of the educational institutions in Kerala, carried out a furious campaign against the draft law, and the "Communist"

government agreed to amend it in accordance with the Catholics' objections. Still not satisfied, the reaction attacked the law, once voted, in the Indian Supreme Court, which rejected it as unconstitutional.

In agriculture, which accounts for the livelihood of about 80 % of Malayalees, the Kerala "Communist" government has an equally poor record. It put through an Anti-Eviction Ordinance of a somewhat more progressive nature than those of previous governments. But the application has been disgraceful. Communist landlords have been able to evict tenants with impunity. Communist and fellow-traveler landowners sell their lands to the government at inflated prices. The government settled the important province-wide Kuttanad dispute between rural labor and the landlords so scandalously in favor of the latter that even Stalinist trade-unionist leaders protested, while the reactionary Catholic and Hindu press congratulated the government.

Concerning the nationalization of the forests, for which two million rupees had already been provided, the government dishonored its election pledges, and instead legislated to rent them from the private owners for a thumping sum. The idea of nationalizing foreign-owned estates has simply been abandoned.

In industry, the government's desire to bring new industries to Kerala caused it to make a deal with the giant Birlas interests for setting up a rayon pulp factory at Nilambur the terms of which are a terrible blow to the Kerala trade unions. The officers of those Communist-led unions have already been putting the strongest pressure on the rank and file not to strike under any circumstances; and in many union struggles the Communist-led unions have acted as strikebreakers.

Even worse is the behavior of the government itself in strike situations. There have been 27 cases of the notorious police "lathi-charges," and many cases of the use of tear-gas. But the peak was reached on July 26th at a locked-out cashew-processing factory near Quillon, when pickets trying to prevent trucks from carrying away finished products were fired on by the "Communist" government's police, killing several workers and wounding many.

So reactionary has the policy of the Kerala "Communist" government toward the workers become that even SA Dange, the Indian Stalinist national trade-union top, and some other national Stalinist leaders, raised protests against it. But they treat the situation as exceptional, and fail to draw the conclusion that the actions of the Kerala "Communist" government flow with inevitability from the Indian Communist Party's overall policy of class collaboration. Nevertheless, what these leaders carefully refrain from admitting is being learned, the hard and bitter way, by the rank and file of the Kerala workers in their own flesh-and-blood experience. That lesson will not easily be forgotten.