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Report on Political Developments

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International

The international scene was dominated by the criminal war of aggression on Iraq by the United States and Britain. The consequences of that action are still unfolding and will have a major impact on relations within the imperialist bloc and the trend developing towards multi-polarity. Further, the new aggressive phase, ushered in by September 11, of a US bent upon extending and consolidating its hegemony, poses serious threats to the sovereignty and independent decision-making powers of all countries; in particular of those countries which are not prepared to succumb to its blandishments.

The invasion of Iraq by the American and British forces took place on March 20th and the three-week operation has led to the occupation of Iraq by the imperialist powers. The war on Iraq was long-expected given the fabricated charges against the Iraqi regime and the build up of the armed forces in the gulf region. President Bush and Prime Minister Blair were determined to oust the Saddam Hussein regime and occupy Iraq to accomplish their aims. For this, it was prepared to defy world opinion and bypass the United Nations. Throughout the period of the invasion, big demonstrations involving millions of people took place around the world; a continuation of the protest marches which preceded the actual war.

The military aggression led to the death of thousands of Iraqi civilians and many more of its armed forces. Tens of thousands were injured. The people of Iraq were subjected to an array of destructive weapons such as cluster bombs, bunker busters and fuel-air explosives. The massive aerial bombardment destroyed much of the infrastructure of the country. Most of the cities and towns are without electricity and water supply. Even after six

weeks of the occupation, the Americans have failed to unearth any weapons of mass destruction which was the pretext for their criminal aggression.

US Occupation

The US occupation has ushered in widespread lawlessness and looting which has made life a misery for its people and destroyed much of the treasures of Iraq's rich history. The looting of the National Museum of Iraq symbolises this vandalism and pillage. The Americans have connived in this cultural genocide. The US plan is to directly rule Iraq for at least two years. In this period, it hopes to set-up a democratic façade and install a pliant regime. The "reconstruction" of Iraq would mean sharing the spoils of war for the US corporations and a small bit going to Britain and other allies. The oil ministry and the oil wells are already under the control of the US. Reviving the extraction and pumping out of the oil, remains the highest priority. Already the contracts given out to Bechtel Corp., amounting to \$680 million and to firms like Halliburton portend the fate of Iraq as a virtual colony.

The plans to install an interim administration consisting of loyal Iraqis by the end of May had to be given up as the motley crowd of Iraqi leaders brought back from exile and financed by the United States have no credibility within Iraq. Popular demonstrations against the US occupation are growing in numbers and size. With the removal of the Baathist regime, there has been an assertion of Shia aspirations which is mainly led by the religious leaders. Being a majority of the population, any democratic set-up would lead to their having a major share. Given the direct influence of the Iranian political forces, this is creating grave apprehensions in the American ruling circles. The recent flurry of warnings to Iran to keep off Iraq is a recognition of this growing influence.

Once the war began, both France and Germany had to reconcile themselves to the fact that Iraq would soon be under American occupation. Despite the earlier sharp divisions, both Chirac and Schroeder expressed the hope that the war would come to a speedy conclusion. In the post-war scenario, the feuding powers found it expedient to reach a compromise. The UN Security Council resolution of May 16 reflected this new accommodation. The Security Council resolution recognised the US and Britain as the "occupying authority" in Iraq. It further decided to lift the sanctions imposed on Iraq, so that the occupying authority can begin the business of reconstruction of Iraq without constraints. The UN food-for-oil programme would be phased out in six months, after which Iraqi oil could be freely sold in the market. The UN will have no real authority in the administration of

Iraq except in an advisory capacity and in the spheres of humanitarian aid and relief operations.

UN Resolution : Dangerous Implications

The UN Security Council resolution has legitimised the occupation of one of its member states by two permanent members of its Security Council. This is a retrograde step as it reverses the role the UN has so far played of a trustee during the decolonisation process of a country in transition to independence. In this case, the reverse has happened. The "trusteeship" has been given over to occupying powers who have violated the sovereignty of an independent member country. The UN has abandoned its responsibility towards Iraq after a war, waged against its charter.

The United States, arrogant with its overwhelming power, continues with its rampage. It does not respect any international norms and expects all countries to fall in line with its interests. During the war, it threatened Syria with dire consequences if, in anyway, helped the remnants of the Saddam regime. Having got a degree of compliance from the Syrian government, it has turned its attention to Iran, the second member of the "axis of evil". The flurry of charges against Iran is meant to check its direct influence on the Shia population in Iraq. The hawkish sections in the Bush administration would also like to keep up the momentum to try and effect "regime change" in Iran. The familiar charges are being trotted out about Iran's nuclear potential and the sheltering of Al Qaeda elements within its borders.

The occupation of Iraq will have far reaching consequences in the Middle East. America is in control of the world's second largest oil reserves. It is bound to establish military bases in Iraq, a direct imperialist presence which was absent with the overthrow of the pro-western regime in Iraq in 1958. Far from eliminating terrorism, the US occupation will be a constant catalyst for terrorist attacks as the suicide bombings in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia and in Morocco testified. The Saudi regime, which has been the most loyal to the Americans, is already caught in the vice of growing fundamentalism which it patronised and its servility to the Americans.

"Road Map" for Palestine

The war on Iraq will herald the next step in the American plan to reorder the Middle East. The target is now Palestine. The "road map" prepared by the US for peace between Israel and Palestine has been presented. Prior to that, the Palestinian side came under tremendous pressure to sideline Yasser

Arafat. A "regime change" was planned for the Palestinians too. A new Prime Minister, Mahmud Abbas, approved by the western powers had to be installed. The formation of the Cabinet headed by Abbas took longer as the choice of the Security Minister was resisted by Arafat.

The peace plan is another effort to cheat the Palestinians of an independent state. The plan is vague and the stages ambiguous in the road towards a Palestinian state. All the illegal Jewish settlements upto March 31st, 2001 will remain in the West Bank and Gaza. By 2005, this will mean that the Palestinians will be given in the name of a State, three enclaves separated by Jewish settlements. There is no guarantee for the return of 3.5 million refugees living outside. Yet, this plan with the approval of the EU and Russia is being imposed on the Palestinian people who have, at this juncture, nothing else but their will to continue their resistance. Both Iraq and Palestine are symbolic of the new imperialist colonisation. They will, therefore, continue to be the most potent symbols of resistance against the new imperial hegemony and Zionist aggression.

US-DPRK Stand Off

The third member of the "axis of evil", North Korea, has also been America's target. After the DPRK announced the re-opening of the nuclear reactor and its withdrawal from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the Bush administration has been mounting pressure demanding that North Korea call off its nuclear programme. China which had advocated talks between the US and the DPRK, agreed to host a meeting in Beijing in April between the two governments with its own participation.

The Beijing talks can be seen as one step towards the continuing efforts for a negotiated settlement on the demands made by the DPRK that the US adhere to the 1994 agreement and the US charge that North Korea is going ahead with its nuclear weapons programme. The North Korea government has asserted that they have the right to run their nuclear plant which processes plutonium for their power needs, since the US reneged on the 1994 agreement. The DPRK has made it clear that it will not be cowed down by the American invasion of Iraq and is fully prepared to meet any military threat to its sovereignty and security.

Attacks on Cuba

The climate of US bullying has affected Cuba too. In the recent period, the US interests section based in Havana has been openly inciting and supporting opposition elements. The spate of hijackings have been

encouraged by the US providing asylum to the hijackers. In April, the Cuban government arrested a number of US-sponsored opposition groups and put them on trial. They were sentenced to prison terms. To curb the spate of hijackings, three hijackers of a ferry, who killed two people, were sentenced to death and executed. This caused an uproar outside Cuba with charges of violation of human rights and brutality leveled against the Cuban government. President Fidel Castro and the Cuban government have powerfully rebutted all these charges, including the latest effort by the Bush administration to paint Cuba as a State sheltering terrorists. The May Day rally of a million people was an effective demonstration against the US machinations.

Trends of Multi-polarity

The inter-imperialist contradictions which sharpened over Iraq will be muted in the post-war period. The recent G-8 summit at Evians, France made such an effort. But the divisions will remain. One of the threats which America perceived from Iraq concerned the dollar. In 2000, the Iraqi government had switched to the euro for its oil dealings with the European Union. The value of the global oil trade is above \$600 billion. The dollar is the currency for this trade. Any switch from this would fundamentally weaken the US currency and its economy. With the recent decline in the value of the dollar, the growing attraction of the euro for the OPEC countries would signify a serious threat to the pre-eminence of the American currency. America now has got the upper hand in Iraq but the world capitalist economy is still plagued by the difficulties of the major capitalist centres. These contradictions will not disappear. Within the European Union itself, the conflict will manifest in new forms.

In April, at the Athens European Union summit, formal clearance was given for eight more countries to join the Union. They are all East European countries which were former members of the Warsaw Pact and who are at present loyal allies of the United States. Within the expanded 25-member Union, the conflicting trends for a strong independent European Union which serves the interests of countries like France and Germany and the Atlanticists, i.e., those who advocate close ties with America, which include the new entrants of Eastern Europe alongside Britain, Spain and others, will continue.

It is in this background that a complex series of relationships which will seek to erode or restrain the American superpower and its unilateralism will continue to evolve. On one side, Russia and China continue to strengthen their cooperation as seen in the recent visit of Hu Jintao to Moscow and the

joint statement issued. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit consisting of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has met and decided to set-up a permanent secretariat in Beijing. Four countries of the CIS -- Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Uzbekistan -- have decided to unify their military command. The United States, on its part, would seek to find ways to arrive at a more stable understanding with Russia in order to prevent the consolidation of the three countries -- Russia, France and Germany -- who came together on the Iraq issue.

While American economic power and military might still provides it with the wherewithal to dictate and dominate, the world economic situation indicates that military power alone will not suffice to sustain its global hegemony.

World Economy

The report of the March Central Committee meeting had noted that the United States' economy has not seen an effective revival and this, in turn, is affecting the prospects of the world economy at a time when the economies of the other two major capitalist centres -- Japan and Germany -- are in a deflationary state. As far as the US is concerned, the GDP growth last year was 2.4 per cent, less than what was required to boost the economy. The unemployment rate remains above six per cent. The huge current account deficit has been sustained so far by massive inflows from abroad. With the economy showing no real signs of revival, despite successive cuts in interest rates, any slowing down of the capital flows which are to the tune of one to two billion dollars a day would lead to a serious crisis. Currently the US has run up a national debt of 86.4 trillion dollars. The decline in the value of the dollar can help to an extent in making imports cheaper but any serious fall in the value of a dollar can lead to major difficulties for the economy. That is what is raising fears of deflation in the US when Japan and Germany are already in such a situation. Japan's economy has been growing at the dismal rate of just over one per cent per year, while Germany's growth rate has declined in the last quarter of 2002 and the first quarter of 2003. The OECD outlook for the 30 rich countries forecasts a low growth rate of 1.9 per cent for 2003.

Since the second world war, government spending and low interest rates had helped pull the US economy out of recessionary spells. But this time, despite interest rates being cut 12 times in the past three years and the government's budget having swung from a \$ 237 billion surplus in 2000 to a projected deficit of \$ 300 billion this year, the economy shows no signs of reviving. Faced with such a situation, hopes rest on the billions of dollars of

contracts which "reconstruction" of Iraq will bring and the lucrative income which can flow from the Iraqi oil industry. Thus, the US hopes to not only overcome but firmly establish its hold over the capitalist world economy.

It is in this backdrop that the United States is seeking to use its global war against terrorism after September 11, 2001 to shift the terms further in favour of US capitalism. Unlike in the military sphere where its dominance is overwhelming, in the economic sphere, the contest is less unequal and will become more intense.

Another feature of the post-1991 world situation is that all the imperialist powers stand united when it comes to imposing burdens on the third world and the developing countries. The slowdown in world trade and the bleak prospects for growth at the global level means greater pressures on the poorer countries. This will be manifested in the WTO ministerial meeting to be held at Cancun in September, where GATS and other issue will be taken up for discussion.

The drive for total hegemony by the US and for extending its economic interests by aggressive military actions and unilateralism will be met with resistance not only from people around the world but from its imperialist partners. Despite its triumph over Iraq, at no time has America been so reviled and opposed by different forces around the world. The feeling roused in this period against the US war on Iraq has to be channelised to strengthen the anti-imperialist struggles and the movement against imperialist driven globalisation.

Sri Lanka: Talks Stall

The negotiations which began between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE fifteen months ago with Norwegian mediation, stalled with the LTTE unilaterally announcing on April 21 that it was suspending further talks. The LTTE announced it would not attend a donors conference to be held in Tokyo in June. The LTTE was also unhappy at not being invited to a peace conference held in Washington given the fact that the US still lists it as a terrorist organization. There are two major reasons for the breakdown of the talks. The first is the demand of the LTTE that an interim administration outside the purview of the current unitary Constitution be set up in the Tamil areas. The second is the demand that the Sri Lankan armed forces remove its high security zones from the Jaffna peninsula. The government stand is that any administrative set-up has to be under the Constitution and it has offered as an alternative a development-oriented structure. As for

relocating the troops out of Jaffna, it is linked to the demand for the demilitarization of the LTTE.

The problem is complicated by the different positions adopted by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Wickramasinghe. The President has said that any step to set-up an interim administration outside the Constitution will be illegal and she would dismiss the government if it agrees to it. She is also critical of the Norwegian mediators, charging them with trying to undermine Sri Lanka's sovereignty. With the relations between the President and Prime Minister deteriorating, the chances of an early settlement are also difficult. Despite these problems, all mainstream parties want the talks to continue, which also reflects the desire of the people for peace.

India-China Relations

There have been some steps taken in the recent period which augur well for India-China relations. The visit of Defence Minister George Fernandes in April has helped the ongoing dialogue between the two armed forces. This is being followed up by the visit of the Prime Minister to China later this month. In the meantime, there was a meeting between Vajpayee and the Chinese President Hu Jintao in Moscow. The visit to China is expected to give an impetus to the work being done by the Joint Working Group on the boundary dispute.

National Situation

Indian Stand on Iraq

The Vajpayee government adopted a double-faced stand throughout the war on Iraq. It refused to categorically oppose the war being planned by the United States. But it was forced by public opinion and the opposition parties demands to agree to a resolution in Parliament which opposed the war and called for the withdrawal of US and British troops from Iraq. Even here it adamantly refused to use the term condemn to characterize the aggression. Soon after, the BJP-led government was eager to erase this trace of criticism of the US action and to make amends. It got the opportunity when the US asked India to send a contingent of troops for policing the country under US occupation. The Indian government was ready to comply and kept a division of the army ready for the purpose. However, since this would not be part of an UN peacekeeping force, the government was forced to wait for the UN to adopt a resolution on Iraq.

The U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution which recognized the US as the occupying authority. It did not sanction a UN peacekeeping force. The US would run Iraq as the occupying authority and not the UN. The government is trying to get over this problem by citing a clause in the resolution which calls upon member states to cooperate in stabilizing the situation in Iraq.

The US wants to withdraw the bulk of its troops deployed in Iraq as it does not want its army to do the job of policing and putting down the continuing protests. It has approached 15 countries to send troops to replace its armed forces. It will be shameful if the Indian government sends the Indian army to do the job of policing under an illegal American occupation. It will mean our soldiers will have to suppress the people who are opposed to the American occupation. Our soldiers cannot be made to act as paid mercenaries of the US. The Party must conduct a big campaign to stop the sending of Indian troops to Iraq.

Since the last Central Committee meeting in March, the Party intensified the anti-war campaign given the imminence of the US attack. After the war began, the Party organized, along with other Left and democratic parties big anti-war protests. Such protests were conducted in all the states, the notable being in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi, Kannur, Alleppey, Bhopal, Guwahati, Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, Lucknow, Patna and other state capitals. The biggest anti-war demonstration took place in Kolkata on March 30 in which several hundred thousand people participated. West

Bengal witnessed a sustained fortnight long anti-war campaign. In many places, local protests were organised by groups, some spontaneously. The movement would have acquired a wider sweep if the non-Left parties had gone to the people and mobilised them. The Congress was the main culprit in this regard. It did not even agree to be part of the joint call given by eight parties to observe March 31 as a national day of protest.

India-Pakistan Relations

A new turn was given to Indo-Pakistan relations after the Prime Minister's speech at Srinagar in which he called for resuming talks with Pakistan. This opened the way for efforts to revive dialogue between the two countries and escalate tensions. This is a welcome development. Since the failure of the Agra summit in January, 2001, the Party has been advocating the resumption of bilateral dialogue which would cover all outstanding issues between the two countries. However, with the September 11 events and the US military attack on Afghanistan, both the Vajpayee government and the Musharaff regime began to rely on the US to act as the mediator between the two countries. After the terrorist attack on Parliament on December 13, 2001, tensions escalated dramatically and India stationed half a million troops on the border, with Pakistan doing the same. The US government sent a series of its representatives to intercede between the two countries. Contrary to the BJP government's expectation, the US relied heavily on the Pakistani regime in its operations to oust the Taliban regime and occupy Afghanistan. It continues its close military coordination with the Pakistani regime to apprehend the Al-Qaeda elements.

The US has been mounting pressure on both governments to resume talks. Colin Powell promised to turn his attention to the sub-continent once the war on Iraq was over. It is in such a situation that the Vajpayee initiative has taken place. Despite this background, resumption of a bilateral dialogue is in the interests of both countries. There should be sufficient ground prepared for the dialogue to be sustained and for the agenda to be finalized. There are many hostile elements working on both sides, but among the common people there is an urge for peace and normalcy. Promoting a composite dialogue on all outstanding issues will help to normalise relations. Immediately the return of high commissioners and restoring travel links will help to improve relations.

Jammu & Kashmir

Within Jammu and Kashmir the situation is favourable for talks for a political solution. The assembly elections and the assumption of an elected

government relatively devoid of the past practices of rigging, has roused the expectations of the people. The political process has been enlivened to some extent. However, the Centre is unable to take any serious initiative in this regard. The NN Vohra mission cannot be expected to yield much result given the earlier experiences with similar envoys. The Central government must seriously discuss with the state government and the elected representatives on how to promote a wide-ranging dialogue with all groups and forces. The stumbling block has been the BJP's stand on Article 370 and rejection of autonomy. The question of devolving maximum autonomy within the framework of the Indian Union cannot be avoided anymore.

It is apprehending this favorable situation, that the hardcore extremist groups stepped up their violent attacks to vitiate the atmosphere. The horrible massacre at Nadimarg in which 24 people belonging to the *pandit* community were killed was designed to create communal tensions. The jihadi groups are desperately trying to step up their attacks on the security forces. The Indo-Pakistan dialogue will be a further setback to these fundamentalist forces.

Political Situation

As the assembly elections to the four states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Delhi near, the political tussle between the BJP and the Congress has intensified. The fifth state Mizoram is not in the same category as the other four, as the main fight is not between these two parties. For both these parties, the stakes are high. The Congress runs the government in all these four states. It is intent on retaining them. For the BJP, all the four states have been its traditional strongholds. It has ruled in all the three states (Chattisgarh was part of Madhya Pradesh) in the past. Together, these states have 72 members in the Lok Sabha. So these elections have a bearing on the next parliament elections too.

The BJP has been occupied with the preparations for these elections. During the February Union Cabinet reshuffle, the BJP selected its leaders to head the campaign in these states by sending Uma Bharati and Vijayraje Scindia to MP and Rajasthan respectively. In the recent Cabinet reshuffle, two more ministers were added from these states. The BJP has not bothered to camouflage the fact that it is now completely dominating the Cabinet at the expense of its NDA partners. Among those inducted are Chinmayanand, a VHP swami who is a leading light in the Ram temple movement. He has been allotted a portfolio in the Home Ministry. There can be no greater signal as to who calls the shots within the government. The Cabinet reshuffle has not strengthened the coalition. The exit of Ajit Singh from the

Ministry and the fiasco over the induction of Mamata Banerjee highlight the further marginalisation of the non-BJP parties.

In Uttar Pradesh, the opposition to the BSP-BJP government has strengthened with the Ajit Singh-led RLD joining hands with the Samajwadi party and the Congress decision to work together with the rest of the opposition. This has revived the chances of putting the Mayawati government in the dock.

RSS-BJP Coordination

The RSS has directly intervened to ensure coordination between its different affiliates and to smoothen government-party relations. The RSS convened a three-day meeting in Delhi in April which was attended by all the important ministers and leaders belonging to the RSS starting from Vajpayee, Advani, Joshi and others. Sudarshan, the RSS chief, presided. It was decided that each RSS organisation, though it would function independently, would coordinate its activities with the others. Significantly, the BJP leadership assured that it was committed to the Ram temple and to help the VHP's efforts in this regard.

The RSS orchestrating the BJP and government is no more sought to be hidden and is proclaimed openly. Such conclaves testify to this organic link. The refusal by the Supreme Court to vacate the stay on the acquired land at Ayodhya has not deterred the BJP government or the RSS combine. The Court order to excavate the land beneath the site where the Masjid stood, is part of a plan to give the temple demand legitimacy by spurious archaeological evidence. The government has followed this up with a submission before the Liberhan Commission that there is historical evidence substantiating that a Ram temple existed at the site where the Masjid stood.

The VHP's programme of *trishul* distribution particularly in the states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh was meant to raise communal tensions and help the BJP with communal polarization. The decision of the Rajasthan government to ban such ceremonies and the action taken in arresting Togadia, who sought to defy the ban, showed how a firm stand can counter such disruptive activities. However, the Congress leadership does not have a common stand on the matter. In Kerala, A.K. Antony, the Chief Minister announced that he saw no need to ban a similar ceremony in the state and justified it in the name of maintaining harmony between different communities. In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress leadership has displayed crass opportunism in competing with the BJP for a Hindu platform. After advocating a total national ban on cow slaughter, the Chief Minister

Digvijay Singh went ahead with raising issues such as Uma Bharati's polluting a Hanuman temple by offering a cake to the deity and organizing religious recitals by her brother who defected from the BJP.

Congress Conclave

The Congress party has also been gearing up to face the elections. The Srinagar conclave of 15 Congress Chief Ministers was meant to streamline the state governments' functioning and to highlight the positive aspects of their functioning. It also saw the pronouncement by Sonia Gandhi that the Congress is willing to enter into electoral alliances to take on the BJP-led alliance. The decision, though belated, to join hands with the Samajwadi party and other opposition parties in Uttar Pradesh will be helpful in fighting the BJP-BSP combine.

Party's Stand on Forthcoming Assembly Polls

In the four states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Delhi the main fight will be between the Congress and the BJP. The BJP will try hard to make a comeback in these traditional bastions. That will give a big boost to the BJP and the communal forces. The aim must be to prevent it from coming to power and run governments in these states. These elections are also important as they will have a direct bearing on the Lok Sabha polls.

In the four states, the Congress governments have been implementing the policies of liberalisation and privatisation. There is also popular discontent because of their failure to tackle the drought effectively and to deal with other problems of the people. In such a situation, while calling for the defeat of the BJP we should also expose the Congress government's record and oppose the anti-people policies.

Neither the Left nor the non-Congress secular parties have any significant strength in these states except a few pockets. We should contest a limited number of seats where we can effectively intervene in the electoral arena and which can help us to strengthen our mass base. We should adjust with the CPI and secular opposition parties in those seats where they have a base and in general call for the defeat of the BJP. Our Party should conduct an independent campaign in this regard.

Economic Situation

The effects of the deep agrarian crisis are being experienced by the vast sections of the rural population. The adverse effects of the drought

conditions, which began in 2002, continue. There has been a fall in the production of crops allround adding to the squeeze on the purchasing power of the peasantry. It is not just the drought which is responsible for the distress in the agrarian sector. A decade of cuts in public investment in agriculture has had its direct impact on rural employment.

In a situation where employment as a whole is shrinking, rural employment is the worst affected. NSS data shows that the annual growth rate of employment in the rural areas has plunged from 2.03 per cent between 1987-88 to 1993-94 to 0.58 per cent between 1993-94 to 1999-2000. This is well below the rate of growth of rural population which indicates a substantial increase in rural unemployment.

According to a study done by Prof. Utsa Patnaik, the absolute amount of per capita food availability in the year 2002-03 was the lowest of the last six decades and lower than the years of the second world war, which saw the Bengal famine. The agricultural distress is manifested in continuing suicides by farmers and the mass migration of rural poor to urban centres and to other states to work on below subsistence level wages. The suffering of the people has been enhanced by the paltry and inefficient drought relief measures taken, whether it be in Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh or other states.

The Central government stubbornly refuses to release the huge stock of foodgrains for a massive 'food for work' programme, which can generate employment and create rural infrastructure which has been starved of public funds. In the coming days, the Party will have to actively intervene to take up the issues affecting the rural poor and the peasantry. The situation will worsen further if monsoons are deficient this year too. Already the heat wave around the country has caused a lot of suffering. More than one thousand people have died in Andhra Pradesh alone. Most of them are the poorest sections whose physical debility has precipitated these deaths.

The Central government has been trying to push forward its privatisation drive of the public sector units even as it faces growing resistance. The government was put on the defensive on the HPCL and BPCL disinvestment proposals in both Houses of Parliament. Due to allround opposition in Orissa, the Nalco sell off had to be indefinitely postponed. Now the government is aiming to disinvest part of the shares it holds. The government is pushing forward with opening defence production to the private sector and the privatisation of major airports.

In defence production, the government has approved the production of weaponry such as missiles, torpedos, guns and ammunition in the private

sector. While Indian private sector can have 100 per cent ownership in the defence industry, foreign direct investment is also allowed upto 26 per cent. By letting foreign arm manufacturers to build factories and having share with the local partners, the Vajpayee government has opened the vital defence industry sector to the big multinational arms manufacturers. It is significant to note that neither China nor Pakistan, our neighbouring countries, have gone so far. With this opening up, there is no vital sector left which has not been opened to foreign capital by the Vajpayee government.

West Bengal Victory in Panchayat Elections

The West Bengal panchayat elections assumed national significance being the sixth successive elections held after the path-breaking measures taken in rural Bengal in implementing land reforms and nurturing local democracy through panchayat system. The CPI(M) and the Left Front had to face a concerted and determined vilification campaign from its opponents and the media during the election campaign. The main opposition parties -- the Trinamool Congress, the BJP and the Congress -- came to an understanding to fight the elections. Such an understanding extended to one-third of the total seats and they roped in some of the smaller parties like the Jharkhandis and splinter groups like the PDS and two of the major naxalite groups.

Having no policy framework to counter the Left Front's remarkable record in the panchayati system, the rural vested interests rallying behind the opposition resorted to physical attacks and killings targetting the CPI(M). This was then distorted and portrayed as a reign of terror being created by the CPI(M). Of the 42 people killed during the entire campaign, 26 belong to the CPI(M). This, in itself, nailed the lie about the CPI(M)-sponsored violence. What was witnessed in the elections was a sharp class struggle with the rural vested interests out to deprive the rural poor of their gains.

The performance of the CPI(M) and the Left Front this time was better than in the 1998 polls. The Left Front won 65.7 per cent of the gram panchayat seats; 74.2 per cent of the panchayat samiti seats; and 86.7 per cent of the zilla parishad seats. Of these, the CPI(M) alone got 58.6 per cent of the gram panchayat seats; 67.4 per cent of the panchayat samiti seats; and 76.8 per cent of the zilla parishad seats -- altogether in the total three-tier seats, the CPI(M) got 60.05 per cent. Of the total seats, the Left Front won 67.2 per cent this time as compared to 58 per cent in 1998. This sweeping victory is a striking endorsement by the rural people of the Left Front's performance in the panchayat system.

The Trinamool-BJP alliance has suffered a serious defeat -- the BJP managing to win only one seat in the zilla parishads in the entire state. The victory of the Left Front has once again highlighted the relevance of the alternative policies adopted by the CPI(M) and the Left Front government in West Bengal.

This victory has been achieved in the face of a determined onslaught by the bourgeois-landlord parties. As in the case of the Tripura elections, the Left forces have to face an allround attack which seeks to dislodge it from its vantage positions. This victory is, therefore, highly commendable and testifies to the deep-roots of the Party and the Left among the people in West Bengal.

Tripura

After the decisive victory registered by the CPI(M) and the Left Front in the recent assembly elections, the extremist forces have sought to vent their frustration by intensifying their attacks on innocent people in remote areas. On May 6, at Satchhari, a remote hamlet close to the Bangladesh border, a NLFT extremist gang committed a brutal massacre, killing 21 people and injuring six. Most of those killed were supporters of the CPI(M). This was followed by another attack, the next day, when another extremist gang killed nine people at Maharchhara at Kalayanpur market place in Khowai sub-division. Apart from this, key CPI(M) cadres and their families have been targetted and assassinated.

After the elections, the bulk of the Central security forces which were deployed have been withdrawn. Despite repeated requests, the borders are undermanned with insufficient deployment of the Border Security Force. The Central government, which goes on proclaiming its commitment to fight terrorism, must address the terrorist violence in Tripura in a more serious fashion and ensure adequate deployment of security forces to check the extremist gangs which cross the border for their nefarious activities.

The Congress party is continuing its tie-up with the INPT disregarding the adverse verdict given by the people on this unscrupulous alliance. The Left Front government has to take up its commitments to the people for ensuring development and providing relief to the people, while taking strong measures to put down the terrorist depredations.

Kerala Events

During the last Central Committee meeting in March, the Muthanga forest firing incident had taken place and a demand for a judicial enquiry raised. In the face of the adamant stand of the Antony government not to order such an enquiry, a big struggle was launched on this demand. The LDF called for the picketing of police headquarters in all district centres on March 17. On that day, the police unleashed brutal repression, the like of which had not been seen in Kerala for a long time. Hundreds of CPI(M) and LDF activists were injured in brutal lathicharges. Amongst those seriously injured were members of the state secretariat, Sivadasa Menon and Karunakaran and CPI(M) MPs, N.N. Krishnadas and Ajayakumar. Around 800 persons had to be treated in hospitals. The Antony government finally ordered a CBI enquiry as directed by the National Human Rights Commission which did not accept the report submitted by the state government. Such repression was resorted to by a government which is facing increasing opposition for policies which seek to reverse the progressive gains made in the state.

It is in this background that a division surfaced within the Congress party during the elections to the Rajya Sabha. The group headed by Karunakaran put up its own candidate against the official nominee and polled 26 votes. At the instance of the Congress high command, efforts have been made to maintain unity, but the differences persist.

The UDF, being a combination of all caste and communal forces led by the Congress, has followed a policy of appeasing different communal groups with the sole purpose of consolidating its power and to isolate the CPI(M) and the LDF. The harmful effects of such a policy are being witnessed in the state. The recent killings in Marad near Kozhikode where nine people were massacred by a gang of Muslim extremists is a danger signal. This attack was in retaliation to the communal violence which erupted last year in the same place. The RSS has its influence amongst the Hindu fishermen community and Muslim extremists like the NDF are making inroads among the Muslim fishermen. The spurt in communal and caste activities, instead of being combated, is actually being nurtured by the Antony government. This was seen in the refusal to prohibit the VHP's *trishul* distribution ceremony and the failure to take strong action against organisations like the NDF.

The BJP is seeking to exploit the caste and communal platform as seen in the wooing of the SNDP and appearance of BJP leaders like Advani and M.M. Joshi on its platform. The Party and the Left and democratic forces in

Kerala will have to intensify their efforts to combat all these reactionary forces both on the political and ideological plane and to rally all sections of the working people to fight back the efforts to inject sectarian ideologies and divisive politics in the state.

Women's Reservation

The Vajpayee government decided to table the women's reservation bill for adoption in the Lok Sabha in the last session. This followed an all parties meeting and the usual plea that no consensus could be arrived at. However, when the Congress President and the CPI(M) leader in the Lok Sabha gave in writing that they are committed to support the bill in the present form, the Government was forced to take up the bill. The bill was faced with opposition from the Samajwadi party, the RJD, the JD(U) and some others. But those supporting the bill had three fourths support in the house. Yet, the Prime Minister decided to refer the matter to the Speaker, who after another all parties meeting decided to defer the matter, till an agreement was arrived at. The BJP is veering to the position which is that of the Samajwadi party and some others that it is better to change the method of reservation by reserving one- third of the list of candidates put up by each party. The CPI(M) has taken a firm stand in support of implementing the one-third reservation in seats as provided in the bill.

There have been other measures announced by the Vajpayee government which require a critical response.

Change in Procedure of Election for Rajya Sabha

The government has got a bill passed in Parliament which will fundamentally change the method of election to the Rajya Sabha and also bring about a basic change in the character of the Council of States. The legislation makes a change in the criteria for being a candidate for the Rajya Sabha elections. It does away with the requirement that a candidate belong to the state concerned. Anyone can now contest for a Rajya Sabha seat, if he/she is enrolled as a voter anywhere in the country. This goes against the basic premise of the Rajya Sabha as provided in the Constitution that it is a Council of States recognising the federal principle.

The second change made is in the mode of election. The legislation provides for an open ballot by members of the legislative assembly to elect Rajya Sabha members, instead of the present secret ballot system. The democratic structure existing at all levels involves secret ballot for any election. This is an inherent part of the democratic system. The secret

ballot has been given up because of the inability of some parties to exercise minimum discipline over their MLAs. Floor crossing and bribery should not be checked by giving up the principle of secret ballot.

It is surprising that the legislation got the support of the Congress and other major opposition groups. It is necessary to explain the harmful consequences of this decision to the people and all democratic forces rallied against the erosion of the basic principles contained in the Constitution.

Size of Ministries

The Union Cabinet has decided to bring a bill to limit the size of the ministries at the Central and state levels. This would require a constitutional amendment. The CPI(M) is in favour of limiting the size of the ministries given the overall trend of expanding the ministries to huge numbers. But the government proposal is self-serving and flawed. It proposes the size be limited to ten percent of both the upper and lower houses of parliament and in the case of the states ten percent of the unicameral or bicameral legislature. By this the Central ministry can be the size of 79 (ten percent of 790 MPs).

All recommendations for reforms so far have suggested that the size of the ministry should be limited to ten percent of the lower house. Even the Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution which is cited by the Cabinet for its proposal has recommended that the limit be ten percent of the popularly elected house.

The Vajpayee government was already 78 when the proposal was made and with the recent reshuffle it has gone up to 80. This is the biggest ministry after independence with 60 ministers alone from the BJP. If the actual recommendation of ten per cent of the lower house is accepted, then the Union Ministry cannot be more than 54. Further some states which have upper houses can have bigger ministries as compared to equally big states who have only the lower house. Checking the increasing size of ministries and wastage of public money requires that the limit be kept to 10 percent of the lower house. Some relaxation can be given to smaller states with less than 100 member in the legislature as in the case of the north-eastern states.

National Judicial Commission

The proposal to set up a Commission is supported by the CPI(M) and other parties and lawyers groups. However the composition of the Commission suggested by the Cabinet does not give any independent character to the

body. First of all, it has representatives only from the higher judiciary (three), the executive (the Law Minister) and an eminent person nominated by the Prime Minister. There are no jurists or members of the bar to provide it with an independent character. The government has to reconsider the composition of the Commission and come up with a fresh proposal.

Supreme Court Judgment Facilitates Profiteering in Education

The Supreme Court judgment in the Pai Foundation versus the State of Karnataka has led to a complete deregulation of private institutions in the matter of charging fees and admission norms. The 11 member Constitution bench was meant to look into the position of minority-run institutions but its verdict covers all private institutions. The judgment has overturned the social control over private professional educational institutions set out in the earlier Unnikrishnan case. By this judgement, the floodgates have been opened for a market-centred, commercialized higher educational system. Students and their parents will have to pay exorbitant fees and the concept that education is a “public good” and a basic right has been done away with. The CPI(M) strongly opposes this concept of higher education and calls for effective legislation to empower the State to regulate private educational institutions in the matter of admission norms and fees.

21st May Strike

The 21st May general strike called by the Central trade unions and supported by the national platform of mass organisations was a good success and met with a big response from the working class and other sections of the working people like the peasantry, agricultural workers, women, students and youth. The strike was one of the major working class actions in recent times. The general strike was by and large successful in the coal, port and dock, fertiliser, steel, banking and insurance, oil and defence industry. The strike also met with response from state government employees in some of the states and sections of the employees of the Central government. Workers in the unorganised sector also participated in the strike action in large numbers.

The general strike assumed the shape of a bandh in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura and the general strike had a wider impact in states like Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Assam and Orissa. Thousands of activists picketing the work places were arrested. So were peasants and other sections participating in the rail and rasta roko in different parts of the country. There were lathicharges in scores of places. In many places, workers belonging to the INTUC or the BMS unions joined the strike call.

The momentum built up by 21st May strike must be carried forward, so that the struggle against the policies of the Centre and those state governments pursuing such policies can be fought with greater vigour.

Conclusion

In the coming period, the growing economic difficulties of various sections of the working people must be taken up by the Party at all levels. The impact of the Central government policies and that of the state governments which follow similar policies are leading to growing hardship for rural and urban poor and the middle classes. Rising unemployment, privatisation, deterioration in civic facilities, public health and education, erosion of savings by the drastic cut in interest rates and openly naked pro-rich policies are all issues on which the people can be moved for local struggles and to develop wider movements. The Party must work towards carrying forward the countrywide resistance against the economic policies which has got a fillip from the May 21st general strike.

The distress amongst the peasantry caused by the agrarian crisis as a result of the policies of the government must be taken up as an urgent priority. Issues of crash in prices, lack of credit, usurious debt, lack of electricity and other inputs, employment, decent wages and provision for cheap food for the rural poor are all to be taken up urgently by the kisan and agricultural workers movement with the active participation of the Party.

The Party must work towards rallying all the democratic and secular forces, so that the BJP and the RSS outfits who are out to communalise the atmosphere are checked and isolated from the people. In this context, wherever the BJP makes a bid to expand its influence and consolidate its hold, the Party must work out appropriate tactics to rally wider sections of people against these moves.

The Vajpayee government's pro-US imperialist policies came to the fore during the war on Iraq. The campaign to expose this pro-imperialist policy and link it to the imperialist penetration in our economy and society and to rouse anti-imperialist feelings, so that the fight for the reversal of such policies can be strengthened must be taken up as a basic task.

In the recent period, many social questions have come to the fore. The menace of dowry has affected all strata of families and inflicts misery on tens of thousands of young women. The Party must take the lead in fighting against such social oppression. The Party should continue to champion the cause of women's reservation in the legislatures and Parliament.

The Party should conduct a fortnight long campaign from August 16 to 31 to highlight these issues: Economic policies which erode sovereignty and have ruined the livelihood of millions of peasants, workers, artisans and agricultural workers will be one of the themes of the campaign. The campaign will also take up the threat posed by the communal agenda of the BJP-RSS combine and its fall-out. The Party will also highlight the growing influence of imperialism in our society due to the pro-imperialist policies of the Vajpayee government. The Party will put forward its alternative policies on all these issues during the campaign. The campaign will culminate in state-level rallies.
