

**THE INDIAN GENERAL ELECTION**

The results of the Indian general elections in January this year came as a surprise to many observers here and in India. Indira Gandhi's Congress party, although only polling 42.6% of the votes, reversed their political fortunes by winning 352 seats in the 544 member Lok Sabha (lower house). The parties which had formed the previous administration, and the caretaker government set up last August (Janata, Lok Dal and Devraj Urs' Congress party) won only 85 seats between them. The Left Group of parties (Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist), and two small left wing parties) gained control of 53 seats, an increase of 17 over the number held in the previous Lok Sabha.

The main reason for this massive swing was the disastrous effect of the Janata government's policies. This government had been elected in 1977 as a reaction against authoritarian policies pursued by the Indira Congress during the Emergency of 1975-77. However, more people were shot dead by police in 1977-8 than during the whole Emergency period; the number of communal incidents rose, and so did the number of reports of assaults on low caste and tribal people. The Indian economy has reached an all time low; power shortages have crippled industry and it is predicted that there will be a shortfall of 50% between supply and demand in the current financial year. This, together with the Janata's industrial policies, led to a negative index of industrial growth in the first half of the current financial year — for the first time in India's post-independence history. The rate of inflation increased particularly following the return to deficit budgeting last March, and was running at 20% by the end of 1979. The official cost of living indexes for rural and urban workers rose by 10.3 % and 8.4% respectively between March and August last year.

Against this background it was not surprising that voters turned away from the Janata party, which could offer nothing but promises and reminders of the faults of the previous Congress administration. The two other bourgeois parties which had run the caretaker administration (Lok Dal and Devraj Urs' Congress party) had not used their position to try to do something about the problems facing the country and had only quarrelled among themselves. In any case, the Lok Dal had only been formed in July as a breakaway from the Janata party. Indira Gandhi's Congress campaigned around two themes — the need to restore law and order, and to control the economy. They conducted a vigorous campaign, standing 486 candidates, although Indira Gandhi's decision to stand from two constituencies

indicates that she was not certain of the outcome. The slogan, 'Bring back Indira. Save the Country', indicates the importance placed on her return to the Lok Sabha.

The only force that could have provided a real alternative was the grouping of left parties. However, this was only initiated during the Lok Sabha crisis of July 1979, and its existence as a unified electoral force was not fully confirmed until October when the CPI and CPI(M) finally resolved their differences. Programmatic unity was not achieved, nor could it have been in the circumstances, and the parties only organised their candidates so that they were not competing with each other. The manifestos of the CPI and CPI(M) did share some common features, notably the need for the



left to unite against communalism and authoritarianism (i.e., Janata and Congress) both during and after the election; and on the need for an alternative to the capitalist strategies of economic development so far followed by India. This is the first occasion on which the two main Communist Parties have united at a national level on a major domestic political issue for many years, and appears to have set the basis for continued co-operation, although the parties are a long way from re-uniting.

The Congress party that is now in power is very different from the previous Congress party. In the political purgatory of 2.5 years in opposition all but the most stalwart supporters of Indira Gandhi or her son Sanjay have left the party. The Congress is now an unusually cohesive party (by the standards of Indian bourgeois parties) united around mother and son. Many of the new Congress Lok Sabha members owe their present position to Sanjay Gandhi who was responsible for the acceptance of their nomination. In this situation there is a distinct possibility of a return to dictatorial methods of ruling. This has been indicated by the method of choosing, and composition of the new Cabinet, and some other new appointments. The Cabinet was apparently chosen by Indira Gandhi herself with little or

no consultation of colleagues or party committees, as was normal practice; most of its members are newcomers to the national political scene, although many had often achieved some prominence earlier as associates of Sanjay Gandhi. The key Home Ministry is held by a reported friend of Sanjay, and the newly appointed Commissioner of Police for Delhi — who previously held this post during the Emergency — is also reported to be Sanjay Gandhi's associate.

At the time of writing, no steps had been taken to implement new domestic policies, beyond reiteration of the election promises about the need to tackle the twin problems of law and order, and the economy. Business houses are reported to be flocking to support the new government, doubtless hoping for a return to the Emergency style of industrial discipline at the height of which, in 1976, 78% of man-days lost in disputes were attributed to lockouts, while strikes were only responsible for 22%. There is also speculation that the government may shortly seek the dissolution of those state governments not run by the Congress. The previous Janata government had ordered elections in states then governed by the Congress on the grounds that the state and centre governments should be of the same political complexion. Should Indira Gandhi take advantage of this precedent, the Left Front governments in West Bengal and neighbouring Tripura would come under attack. The new Left Front government in Kerala, having been elected after the general election, should be safe in this respect, although the past history of centre-state relations calls for caution in making such a prediction.

Whilst the outlook for the working class and people of India may not seem too good, in foreign affairs India has resumed the more independent line for which Gandhi had become known. This has been the case especially over Afghanistan. India feels that the re-arming of Pakistan would constitute a greater threat to peace in the region than the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Indian statements at the recent United Nations Industrial Development Organisation Conference in Delhi also stressed the interests of the developing nations against those of imperialism. It remains to be seen what practical steps will be taken, however. The past record of anti-imperialism shows strong anti-imperialist statements and diplomatic moves going hand in hand with the grant of increased facilities to multi-nationals to invest in India, and cooperation between Indian big business and the multi-nationals to invest in the Gulf states and countries like Indonesia.