

Release of Prisoners

To Talk or Not to Talk to Mamata Banerjee

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A UNITED FRONT WITH A section of the dominant classes always presents trouble not only as regards when to engage and how, but also at the time of disengagement, when to do it, over what time span, and how. However may one deceive oneself, in the hustings just concluded, apart from a small minority, most of those in the democratic movement participated in one way or another in the grassroots united front of the people with the TMC to overthrow the fascist rule of the CPI(M). Now that the people have won, at least just at present, a victory against the immediate further penetration of the fascist hegemony of the CPI(M), democratic forces are debating disengagement.

The debate has begun on the question of the release of political prisoners, but it will spread all over all aspects of the democratic movement. Let us look at the two extreme positions first :

1. Co-operate with the government in its efforts to keep electoral promises. Mobilisation of the people is secondary at this moment.
2. The government is there to serve the ruling classes. Its "efforts" are a sham, and only a people's movement can free the prisoners. There is no question of cooperating with the government.

The task of the day is to rebuild the people's movement, with special emphasis on the people's movement in the jangal mahal. Chhatradhar received 20,000 votes, and this momentum must not be lost. There is still some momentum in civil society and this must be enhanced to build a Watch-dog (or Whip-lash as Sumanta Banerjee called it) movement, starting from a watch on corruption and the redemption of electoral promises. The release of political prisoners certainly merits first call as the movement rolls.

The size of the mandate has overwhelmed the TMC. It has prevented the party from becoming contemptuous of the masses as yet, and the government has started taking steps to keep electoral promises. Having said this, one stutters while looking for other words of appreciation. How are the promises being sorted? In every case, the policy dovetails with corporate aims, and the task of implementation devolve on ministers, officialdom, the police, and celebrities. There is no attempt to involve people in policymaking or implementation of policy. Advisory committees with wise celebrities are certainly not bad, but the path of Singur, Nandigram, and Lalgarh is the path of people's committees.

The people of the areas of movement from which the prisoners have come, and the public at large who voted against the CPI(M) want the release of every one imprisoned by the CPI(M) for political reasons. The question of the release of the Harnad is a smokescreen, and this question, in fact, shows that the role of the people is cardinal. The real question is, *Do the people of the region want the release of the Harnad?* Old-timers will remember this was how the police were forced to arrest goondas under the "Goondas Act" in Kolkata, by public signature. There must not be discrimination on the basis of charges of violence, judicial completion of conviction, and type of politics. Violence arises as the inevitable outcome of a suppression of democracy. If today's government is pro-people it should not fear past violence. The CPI(M) released all prisoners with political tags. The TMC should not do less. The police, the IAS and the centre will oppose tooth and nail unconditional release. If the people are not mobilised (and not in Kolkata alone), how will this pressure be withstood ? Mobilisation is not secondary. Without people's pressure how will

the UAPA prisoners be freed? And those with life sentences? But, the electoral promises, the large mandate, in which the working people provided the numbers, and the sensitivity of Mamata Banerjee to her popular base and popular opinion provide an interesting foil to corporate pressure. There is certainly something to be done in the committees to block the arguments of the police and the IAS and present counter-arguments to the government, and publicise the whole as a debate before the people. That the committee is not a mere eye wash is shown by the inclusion of the two previous general secretaries of the APDR most well equipped legally to face the police officials.

The government wants to free some prisoners to redeem the electoral promise, at least nominally. The people want to free all. So, there is both a space for talks and the need for struggle, that is, the struggle will have to be conducted both inside the committee and on the road. □□

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