CHAPTER IV

CPI(M), LEFT FRONT GOVERNMENT AND JUTE LABOUR: MOBILIZATION FROM ABOVE

It has been stated earlier that after assuming office in 1977 the CPI(M) in the state like that of 1967 called for the Bolshevik method of mobilising the workers. This method included not only aggressive tactics towards employers and other trade unions but also utilising the Governmental machinery for the purpose of mobilisation. This can be referred to as mobilisation from the “top” or from “above”. At certain times mobilisation from above or the top was to be a precondition for mobilisation from below. This method of mobilisation from above with the help of the institutions available to them at the state level had paid dividends during the first two United Front Government with the base of the CPI(M) among the workers extending to new areas. Hence the party was to use the strategy for mobilisation of the workers from the top or above to a great extent. This time, however, it had to be more practical than in the late 1960s and 1970. This we will see later in the discussion.

In this chapter, we have sought to analyse the strategy which the CPI(M) have employed since 1977, namely the strategy of mobilising from the top or above for the purpose of mobilising the workers in general and the jute workers in particular. It had mainly aimed at providing relief to the jute workers by using its good offices and siding with labour during labour agitations. In our attempt to answer important questions like what has been the approach/attitude of the Government towards the jute workers in general? In what way the CPI(M) had used the partial power and governmental machinery for providing relief to jute workers. In order to answer this question we have divided the whole chapter into several sections and sub-sections. In the first section the position of the CPI(M) in West Bengal and its experiences with the two United Front ministries will be discussed in brief. In the second section, we will discuss the limitations which the CPI(M) faces when in government at the state level along with a discussion of the industrial policies which the party had pursued since 1977 because these policies are aimed at providing relief to the workers and preparing them for mobilisation. In the second section, an attempt will be made to analyse directly the labour policy of the government in general. This will be done keeping in mind that the policy of the Left Front government towards jute workers springs directly from its
approach to labour in general. And in the fourth section, an attempt will be made to understand the CPI(M) led Left Front government’s attitude to jute labour in general. A modest attempt will thus be made to analyse the ministerial measures of the government towards jute workers for bringing it closer to the party.

I

THE CPI(M) IN WEST BENGAL

Before we come to the CPI(M) in government since 1977 and its strategy of mobilisation from above, let us examine in brief the CPI(M)'s position in West Bengal. Traditionally, West Bengal has been held as the stronghold of the Communists and particularly of the CPI(M). It is here a CPI(M)-led Left Front Government is in power since 1977. If one looks at the membership figures, one is startled to learn that West Bengal contributed 1,89,732 members out of a total strength of the Party (5,79,666) in 1991.¹ Contrary to what the Party claims the membership reflects the political influence of the Party in the State. West Bengal also accounts for a large section of the following in the trade union, Kisan and other fronts. Since independence, the Left faction dominated the undivided CPI and even at times the State units went against the decision of the central leadership.² After the split thus it was clear that the CPI(M) will have a large following in the State. After its formation the unit in West Bengal faced several splits, particularly in 1969 and later, but still it had managed to be the most important political party in the State, in terms of its membership and influence.

Since its formation the Party had to face the brutal attacks of the Congress Governments, both State and the Centre, in the form of arrests of its top leadership particularly in late 1964 and early 1965. “In the months following the arrests, the Marxist Left and Communist parties of West Bengal began to cooperate in planning a series of demonstrations, which took place in late July 1965, and linked State economic issues with protest against the defence of India rules, preventive detention and President’s rule....” Within a year of arrests and the events in Kerala, it was clear

² For a discussion on the differences within the factions of the CPI in West Bengal prior to the split see, M. Franda, Radical Politics in West Bengal, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1971.
that Communist alliances with the Marxist left parties of Bengal had been completely restored and
democracy organisations rebuilt, largely on the basis of these demonstrations.3

Throughout the year in 1966 demonstrations, agitations followed and the growing
influence of the Communists was confirmed when the bandh of March 1966 was total. Mass
agitation was encouraged on a number of issues; food shortages, price increases, release of
political detainees, redress of teacher and student grievances, protest against the Defence of India
rules; President's rule in Kerala, etc. Out of these mass agitations the CPI(M) emerged as one of
the leading political party, perhaps next only to the Congress in the State. And the elections
of 1967 confirmed this. The Party was able to come to power in the State, though along with the
Bangla Congress and many other minor parties, for the first time. Bangla Congress was a
disenchanted group which had come out of the Congress and was a representative of the regional
"landowners and millowners".4 Ajoy Mukherjee who was thrown out of the Congress primarily
because of his differences with Atulya Ghosh formed it and he realised that it would need other
non-Congress allies if it was to survive in the segmented political system of West Bengal. We
need not go into details regarding the political alignments which had taken place then, but here one
thing regarding the CPI(M)'s stand needs some mention. We have seen earlier that the CPI(M)'s
position is not against the formation of governments in States, but it realises that no significant
changes can be brought about given the overall framework of the economy, society and polity.
Hence it only aims at carrying "modest programme of giving immediate relief to the people". It
also felt that formations of such governments will give great fillip to the revolutionary movement
of the working people and thus would help the process of building the democratic front.

The political organisational report of the CPI(M) put all that very clearly in 1968. It held:

In a word the United Front Governments that we have now are to be treated and
understood as instruments of struggle in the hands of the people more than as
Governments that actually possess adequate power, that can materially and
substantially give relief to the people.

In clear class terms our Party's participation in such governments is one specific
forms of struggle to win more and more people, and more and more allies for the
proletariat and its allies in the struggle for the cause of people's democracy and
at a later stage for socialism.5

3 Ibid., p. 132.
4 This view is the view held by M. Franda, Radical Politics in West Bengal, pp. 142-44.
   For a different opinion on the support base of the Bangla Congress see B. Dasgupta,
5 Communist Party of India (Marxist), Political Organisation Report, 1968, p.171.
Though the understanding of the Party was clear, but still differences cropped up in 1967 over the question of whether to join or not to join the coalition. Pramod Dasgupta was not in favour of joining and a vast section of the leadership was not or at least initially not in favour of joining the ministry. Anyhow the decision of the State Secretariat and the Central Committee ultimately prevailed. We need not go into details on the CPI(M)'s experiment in governance in 1967 and 1969 but the view of Lieten can be accepted that “both the United Front governments in the late sixties were used as instruments of struggle and the electoral figures (from 18 per cent in 1967 to nearly 34 per cent in 1971) show that it gained support from the poor and democratic masses of the State.”

The strength of the CPI(M) had increased over time in the State and it is reflected from the fact that the Party along with its allies is in power since 1977. The membership of the Party in 1978 (at Salkia Plenum) was 43,342 and in 1985 during the time of the XII Congress, it stood at 1,36,980 and in 1991 it was 1,89,732. Despite this growth of strength the 16th Conference of the State Committee (1988) pointed out that there were certain weaknesses in the Party. The primary one was lack of political education among the Party members and even a section of the local leadership. This is alarming keeping in view that the Salkia Plenum (1978) had also pointed its finger in this direction. This was also accepted in 1980 by the State Committee. The unit held that:

> Among the Party members around 40 per cent are new incumbent. All of them have joined the Party after 1977. These new members had not been given primary Party education. Branch Secretaries are not being given proper Party education, though this is important and was accepted by the Salkia Plenum.

Apart from this weakness there are several, which the Party accepts and tries to overcome. It will not be imperative to analyse it in detail, keeping in view that it will be out of context here. But it can be stated that out of all weaknesses, primary education of the members including leaders and the alienation of the leaders from the masses are the most important ones.

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7 CPI(M), Report on Organisation and Tasks, CPI(M), Delhi, 1992, p.42.

8 See, Partir Chithi (in Bangla), CPI(M), West Bengal State Committee, 1980.
The CPI(M) in the Trade Union Front

It has been stated earlier that the tactics of the CPI(M), according to the Central Committee, "...aim and organising a disciplined working class with revolutionary socialist consciousness, drawing it nearer the Party, with its best elements joining the Party in hundreds, enabling the class as a whole to play its historic political role in the revolutionary struggle". In this aim of organising the working class the Party in 1967 called for "the real Bolshevik method of mobilising the masses." The Bolshevik method of mobilising the masses included not only aggressive tactics towards employers and other trade unions but also utilising the governmental machinery whenever possible. The latter as we shall see later, has been utilised by the government successfully to some extent in West Bengal.

In 1967 the position of the CPI(M) in the trade union front throughout the country was poor but in West Bengal it was comfortable. The formation of the United Front Government in 1967 helped the Party to really pursue the "Bolshevik method of mobilising the masses and more particularly the working class. The Labour Ministry declared the tactic of the 'gherao' as legal which resulted in massive working class actions, ultimately benefiting the left political parties. According to one estimate between March and September 1967, the CPI(M) added 170 new trade unions and the CPI was able to add 140 during the same period. The CPI and the CPI(M) both used the tactic of gherao to increase its influence among trade union workers. can be made out from the fact that out of 1018 cases of gheraos in West Bengal during March-September 1967, 397 were instigated either by the CPI(M) or the CPI. It is not only that the CPI(M) was able to enlist new unions, through aggressive tactics but it was also able to bring existing unions under its banner through aggressive campaigning against other smaller parties. This was to some extent possible because the CPI(M) stood for the policy of "one union in one establishment" which benefited the larger political parties. It may be pointed out here that because of this policy and its result the CPI(M) time and again came into conflict with that of the minor left parties constituting the United Front Government.11

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9 Tasks on the Trade Union Front, Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI(M), Calcutta, 1967, p. 33.
10 Ibid., p. 31.
11 For a detailed discussion, see M. Franda, op. cit., pp. 194-96.
The growth of influence of the CPI(M) among the working class of West Bengal slowed down after the fall of the second United Front Ministry but never stopped altogether. The Party during the Salkia Plenum (1978) claimed its CITU membership figure as 5,39,170 and then in 1981 at 6,20,100. At the time of the 15th Conference of the State Party unit (1985), the membership figure was 6,99,425 and in 198 when the 16th Party Conference was held the figure was 9,70,208. Doubts regarding the figures may be expressed by critics but there is no alternative source which may be used for verification. If the figures available are taken to be correct or near correct, then it is clear that the influence of the party among the workers in the State had increased particularly when the Party is in the government. Two reasons may be attributed for this. First, when the Party forms the Government it is able to pursue radical course of action in the trade union front which helps in increasing its influence and strength. Second, the Government itself pursues pro-labour policies which helps in boosting the image of the Party among the workers. The first, however, was true during the United Left Front experiments and from 1977 to the mid of 1980s but not in the late 1980s and the early 1990s which we will see later.

Though there has been increase in membership the Party is of the opinion that the strength of the Unions is not commensurate to the level of Party’s influence. Several hindrances external in nature and the low level of investment, the closure and lockouts in the factories, the decrease in the level of recruitment had hindered the growth of influence of the CPI(M) among the workers. Other reasons cited are of general nature discussed earlier.

II

THE PARTY IN GOVERNMENT

The CPI(M) returned back to power along with its partners in 1977 after its earlier failures. This time, the CPI(M) along with its front partners bagged 230 seats out of a total of 193 in the legislative assembly. Among the front partners the CPI(M) was the dominant one as it alone captured 178 seats in the house. A long time observer of the political scene of West Bengal, Ajit Roy wrote:

12 CPI(M) Report on Organisation and Tasks, CPI(M), Delhi, 1982, p. 51.
14 See the Report of the Seventeenth Party Conference of the CPI(M) State Unit, CPI(M), Calcutta, 1991.
In most of the districts, the CPI(M) and its Left Front allies have made almost a clear sweep. Indeed in the two northern districts of Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri, the Left Front has bagged all the 21 constituencies. The front has lost only one seat in each of the districts of the Howrah, Burdwan, Bankura and Nadia.\(^{15}\)

The Left Front earned more than double the votes polled by the Congress. It secured 46 per cent of the valid votes as against 22.5 per cent of the Congress and 20.6 per cent of the Janata Party. This electoral performance of the CPI(M) reflected the popularity of the party among the voters of West Bengal. The Party was able to mobilise the masses throughout the turbulent years of the emergency and earlier, by its anti-Congress agitations. The Congress was so discredited in that its stalwarts those who were “responsible for liberating West Bengal from the CPI(M) in 1971-72”, lost the elections. The CPI which sided with the Congress throughout the emergency was rejected too.\(^{16}\)

The dominance of the Left Front and more particularly the CPI(M) have continued since then. In the parliamentary elections in 1980 when the Congress returned to power at the Centre, the CPI(M) along with its Left Front partners was able to capture 37 out of 41 constituencies which went to the polls. In the state assembly elections in 1982, 1987 and 1991 the CPI(M) returned to power along with its allies, though it suffered some reverses particularly in the urban constituencies. In 1982 the Left Front’s leading partner, the CPI(M) secured 174 seats alone, 3 seats lesser than in 1977. In terms of the total votes secured, it polled 8,653,653 votes out of the total 22,439,965 valid votes polled. The Left Front polled 52.67 per cent of votes. In the 1987 elections, the CPI(M) and the Left Front again dominated and won more than 250 seats in the 294 seats legislative assembly with the CPI(M) winning more than 185 seats. The elections of 1992 again confirmed the dominance of the CPI(M), though it lost some of the seats in the industrial belt.\(^{17}\)

CPI(M)’s Perception of State Governments

Let us look into the question how the CPI(M) intends to utilise democratic institutions, particularly provincial governments in the federal set up for mobilisation of masses in general and the working class in particular and the limitations which it confronts in doing so.


\(^{16}\) Quoted from A. Roy, ‘Not a negative vote’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 2, 1977, p.1040.
The CPI(M) realises that given the nature of Indian federal polity nothing much can be done for the masses. Big changes in the state were considered impossible by the party because it realises that “the state governments under the present set up have neither real autonomy nor adequate powers to undertake any radical and really effective measures of relief and reform”. 18 Hence the party has regarded the Left Front government as:

Instruments of struggle in the hands of the people more than as governments that actually possess adequate power, that can materially and substantially give relief to the people.

It had further felt:

In clear class terms our party’s performance in such governments in one specific form of struggle to win more and more people and more and more allies for the proletariat and its allies in the struggle for the case of People’s Democracy and a later stage for socialism. 19

Therefore, the limited powers of the provincial governments could be used for the purpose of limited mobilisation. State governments could be used for the purpose of providing relief to the people under the present economic and social set up and by doing so it felt that it could bring the masses closer to the party which could go a long way in the mobilisation of people’s democracy and socialism. Providing limited relief to the people sprang up from the understanding that state governments under the present set up have very limited power under the constitution.

Limitations Faced By The CPI(M)

Any discussion of the Left Front government must include a discussion of its limitations. Limitations include the constraints of a bourgeois socio-economic arrangement and the limitation of being a member of the ruling front in the state whose powers are limited by the constitution itself. Added to this limitation may be the limitation of relying on a bureaucratic set up which is recruited and ultimately controlled by the Centre. All these three limitations act in one way or another on the CPI(M) in government and impedes its individual capability to take serious decisions of its own. 20

17 For the electoral performance of the CPI(M) and Left Front, see various reports in the Economic and Political Weekly and People’s Democracy.
18 Communist Party of India (Marxist), Political Organisational Report of 1968, CPI(M), Delhi, 1968, p.171.
19 Ibid.
The most important constraint which the CPI(M) confronts is that of the socio-economic arrangement. This is a limitation which a communist party confronts more really than any other political party, because of the long term objective of the party. As we have argued earlier that the economic development which India is witnessing since independence is the development of capitalism. This process of development of capitalism had been referred by Marxist scholars as "State sponsored capitalism" or "State capitalism", which means that the state is acting as an agent for the development of capitalism. The process is similar to what Japan witnessed in the late nineteenth century. As a result all the institutions which have arisen are so designed that it becomes supportive to this way of development of the economy. Hence the socio economic arrangements and the institutions which is supportive of this arrangement act as a constraint on the Left Front Government headed by the CPI(M).

The constitution though provides for a dual set of Government's but in reality it is more unitary than federal. The State Governments or provincial governments possess very little power under the constitution. Apart from enjoying limited powers, the States in the Indian Union over the years had faced considerable erosion of its powers in the wake of growing centralisation of the Indian polity since the inauguration of the Constitution. Though it appears that there are difference of opinions on this particular point of centralisation or not, but the majority of opinion on Indian federalism have pointed out to the fact that throughout the years, the position of the States vis-à-vis the Union, and the State legislatures have eroded considerably. Our understanding is that at the level of the economy, the development of capitalism had resulted in the centralisation of Indian polity and at the institutional level, the States in the Indian Union had suffered because of it. Realisation of this fact by the Front had led to a strong campaign against the process of centralisation. This attack and reaction had taken several forms and it is only partially that the Government headed by the CPI(M) had resisted this encroachments on the powers of the State. This limited autonomy of the States under the constitution and the growing centralisation in the Indian polity had acted as a powerful inhibition to the functioning of the Left Front Government headed by the CPI(M) in West Bengal.

The third but not the least is the administrative machinery on which the State Government had to depend so much for the purpose of implementation of its policies. The elite cadre of IAS,
IFS etc. forms the administrative machine. One must note the purpose for which the whole machinery was created by the colonial government in this country. Bhambri writes:

The British set up the colonial State apparatus, with well developed instruments of oppression to plunder the country and transfer the social surplus to England. They achieved it by identifying the classes that would collaborate and by establishing a highly centralised colonial bureaucracy for the administration of the country.21

This administrative machinery was retained by the new Indian State without much debate.

R. Palme Dutt states:

The entire administrative machinery of imperialism was taken over and carried forward.... 22

What is important is that this administrative machinery is not only controlled by the Centre to a significant extent but is marked by elitism. The role of this administrative machinery in implementing policies of the Left Front Government for the masses is bound to raise doubts. For the Left Front it becomes difficult to control it entirely and it also becomes difficult to implement policies for the poor and the ordinary masses. This is a limitation which the CPI(M) in Government faces in its attempt to provide some relief to the masses through the institutions which is available to it. The Left Front and the CPI(M) leaders in the State legislative assembly from the very beginning were conscious of the limitations. The experiences of the CPI(M) of 1967 and 1969 were enough to teach the parties and the CPI(M) of the limitations. One aspect of the economic limitation was pointed out by the Finance Minister, Ashok Mitra in his first ever budget speech in the Assembly. A correspondent of Economic and Political Weekly wrote:

...Ashok Mitra’s strongest punches in his speech are directed at Centre-State economic relations. The existing position he feels is a hangover of the “colonial imperial framework” that was evolved over 50 years ago following the visit of the Simon Commission. It is out of tune with the growing realisation that powers and representatives should be progressively devolved from the Centre to the States and even to the small administrative units. Ashok Mitra contends such a change can never be effective so long as “fiscal and monetary power is closely held in the hands at the Centre.23

The Finance Minister again pointed out the limitation after one year when he said:

Of the total revenue raised in the country not more than 25 per cent are currently under the command of the States; the deployment of the other 75 per cent is the prerogative of the Central Government.24

The same Minister in an interview with Atul Kohili in 1979 stated eloquently:

What we have to constantly experiment with is how far we can push without invoking some intervention or what is the feasibility frontier. We have the experience of Kerala in 1959 in our mind.25

The head of the Council of Ministers, Mr. Jyoti Basu after serving as the Chief Minister for a term reminded the people:

Real powers lie with the Government at the Centre and it is a bourgeois landlord government building a capitalist economy in alliance with feudalism and collaboration with foreign monopoly capital, which benefits only a minority section of the society....

He further added:

A Left Front Government in a particular State meets with obstacle arising out of the constitutional provisions, highly centralised powers of the Union Government, denial of adequate powers to the States, distortion of the federal principles to the detriment of the rights of the States.

After pointing out to this limitations, the Chief Minister ended with an optimistic note:

Yet, despite the limitations and difficulties, a Left Front State Government such as ours has a significant role to play in the concrete economic and political situation in India.26

Thus, it was clear to the CPI(M) leaders in the Legislative Assembly handling the Government machinery that the constraints on them were real. This was reminded by them to the people and electorate time and again. But despite these limitations, the CPI(M) in Government was optimistic about the possibility of using the institutions for providing relief to the masses.

Before we turn our attention to the Left Front Government’s attitude towards the working class in general and the jute industry in particular, let us look at the industrial situation in the State and the nature of labour force employed in the various industries of the State.

The Inherited Industrial Economy

In all respects, the CPI(M) inherited a stagnant economy in 1977. Agricultural production in 1977 was quite low and the industrial scene even much worse. The industrial

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landscape in West Bengal was dotted by the jute and cotton textile industry, tea manufacturing, iron and steel, manufacturing of railway rolling stock, electrical machinery, chemical industries etc. These industries were regarded as the key industries in West Bengal in terms of employment and value added. So important were these large scale industries that:

These seven industries accounted for nearly 65% of the total value added by West Bengal’s large scale manufacturing sector on an average. These industries employed 69.9 per cent and 64.7 per cent in 1962 and 1967 respectively, of the total number of employees in the large scale sector. 

It is generally agreed that the industrial stagnation and decline started from the late 1960s. The share of West Bengal in the All India ex-factory value of output in the large scale sector declined from 29 per cent in 1947 to 21 per cent in 1964 and further to 11 per cent in 1974-75. West Bengal even had a negative growth rate in the late 1960s. Though it recovered significantly in the 1970s and in the 1980s but it had not reached its earlier positions of the 1950s. The share of West Bengal to total industrial production in 1984-1985 was only 8.1% as against its contribution of 22.9% in 1960. The stagnation in industrial production is corroborated by the data on employment in working factories. In 1965 factory employment in the state was 88,200 workers and in every year till 1982 factory employment remained below that level. Only the 1986 figure of 9 lakh factory workers is marginally higher than the 1965 level. Apart from the industrial stagnation which have contributed to the present condition of the working class, the workers had to face lay off, lockouts and closures. The number of workers affected in 1970 due to the above was 3,27,518 and in 1987 it was 1,65,467 workers. Apart from this the employment in the central public sector industries declined by 63,000 during the period 1976 and 1987.

What can be the reason for this industrial climate in West Bengal? Chittabrata Mazumdar writes:

Over and above these general factors, the industries in West Bengal have suffered much due to certain additional factors viz., the freight equalisation. Policy in respect of iron, steel and coal, inadequacy of fresh investment,

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31 C. Mazumdar, n.15.
unwillingness of government of India to set up modern industries in the region either in the public or in the private sector, lack of modernisation and diversification of the existing industries, lack of ploughback of profit and mismanagement, persistent power crisis.32

Thus it is clear from the above discussion that the Left Front Government inherited an industrial economy which was in decline since the late 1960s. Hence it became imperative for the Left Front to revive the industrial situation by arresting sickness of the existing industries and creating favourable climate for fresh investment, particularly from the private sector in the event of a lack of interest from public sector undertakings due to the discriminatory attitude of the centre. The improvement in the industrial environment was necessary for the Left Front because primarily it sought to mobilise the industrial workers by providing relief from unemployment and condition of abject poverty. This policy of the Government and the CPI(M) will be discussed under a separate heading in this chapter. Before we come to the industrial policy as such let us examine the attitude of the capitalist class and the Government at the Centre whose negative attitude is regarded as the stumbling block behind the industrial condition in the state.

Clearly the bourgeoisie in West Bengal had shown apathy to invest in the State. The Centre have also adopted a discriminatory attitude towards investment in West Bengal particularly after 1977. And this two have contributed to the industrial stagnation and decline in the State. The bourgeoisie in the State though not homogeneous, but are organised in Chambers and Commerce, to promote their own interest. Since the mid-1960s, it started feeling that the environment in the State was not conducive for fresh large scale investment. And it is from then capital started moving out of the State to states which were considered more profitable. The process of moving out of capital became pronounced after the Left Front Government assumed office.

In our earlier chapter we have discussed the business houses preference for the Congress Government in West Bengal. G.D. Birla the leader of the Marwari business house who was dissatisfied with the Congress had reminded his friends:

You can break the Congress. You can weaken it but it is not going to help. You will be replacing this government by communist government and they will be the first to cut your throat. Do not make that mistake....there is no other party in this country except the Congress Party which can give stability. It is a question of

32 ibid.
self-interest. If the Congress Party is bad, the Communist Party is something worse.33

This was clearly the position of the leading business in the 1960s when the Congress in West Bengal had weakened and the Communists were posing a threat to the Congress. The hostility of the houses against the Communist was open in 1967 when the first United Front Government was formed. According to S.S. Kanoria the new Government had created a “law and order problem”. Similarly, the BCCI’s study held the United Front Government led by the CPI(M) for aggravating the “developing economic crisis”. When the President’s rule was imposed in 1968 the business class was jubilant. I.M. Thapar said:

It is the duty of the Centre and the State Government to give maximum possible attention to maintain law and order….Perhaps this (the imposition of President’s rule in West Bengal) is a blessing in disguise as it will give some breathing space to repair the vast damage which has been done to the State after the elections.34

In the 1977, the Left Front returned to power with overwhelming majority. This time the reaction of business was cautiously guarded. This was because of the change of attitude of the Government also. No longer the Left Front Government gave credence to the tactics of gherao. It adopted a much more pragmatic industrial and labour policy. The Centre have also discriminated against the Left Front in allotting public sector undertakings.

In 1977 the Left Front returned to power despite the fact that the business houses in the State tried to prevent it indirectly from winning the elections. But this time business reacted very cautiously. It realised that it had to work under changed conditions. The Left Front Government’s disapproved of the tactics of gherao, which have cost the business houses dearly in 1967 and in 1970, created a condition where the leading business in the State gained confidence. The number or incidence of ‘gheraos’ declined soon and the Left Front adopted pragmatic policies so that industrial degeneration of the State could be arrested. Despite these central decisions by the State Government leading business houses continued to flow capital out of the State, hit at workers and the State Government by its favourite weapon; closures and lockouts and more recently by its weapons “suspension of work”.

33 As quoted in S. Mukherjee, “The bourgeoisie and politics in West Bengal”, in R. Chatterjee and others (ed.), n.14.
34 ibid.
The Industrial Policy of the Left Government

In the industrial sector the policy of the Left Front Government could be best described as a pragmatic policy of combining "industrial peace with working class struggle for better working conditions". The Party in Government felt that the working class could be best mobilised only if the working conditions could be improved and for this stagnation and decline in the industrial sector had to be arrested. The two earlier experiments in government in the late 1960s and in 1970 had taught the Party and its partners in the Front to adopt a conscious and pragmatic policy.

The CPI(M) led Left Front knew from the very beginning that bringing about major changes in the industrial scene, particularly in the large scale industrial sector was beyond its capacity. The agricultural sector was much more controllable than the industrial sector. This partly explains for the pro-rural policy of the Left Front Government. In the industrial front, the Left Front began with creating climate for investment and encouraged the expansion of a balanced industrial growth throughout the State. Secondly, when it realised that expansion of big industries were not going to come easily, it encouraged the creation and extension of small-scale and cottage industries. The State Committee of the CPI(M) have put it in the following way:

...the Left Front Government has adopted a two-pronged strategy of industrial regeneration. On the one hand, it has mobilised determined efforts at developing small scale and village industries on the other, industrial infrastructure has been improved, attractive incentives offered, and joint sector schemes promoted. At the same time industrial relations have been improved with the trade unions behaving in the most responsible manner imaginable.

What has been the result of this strategy? The "cottage and small scale industries have flourished".

By the end of 1989, the Government claimed:

Spectacular performances have been recorded in the cottage and small scale sectors. There are at present more than three lakhs of small industrial units in full operation.

The Government does not have much to boast on the large scale sector. The share of West Bengal to total industrial production was only 8.1% in 1984-85. In 1987 industrial production rose by 4.5 per cent and in 1988 by 3%.

Thus by pursuing a industrial policy which can be regarded as a pragmatic one; a policy of creating favourable conditions for investment which in turn could keep the workers facing unemployment alive, the Left Front Government have sought to mobilise the working class in the urban sector from above. Employment was to be provided to the unemployed workers and job security must be guaranteed to the workers facing the threat of closure and lockout. This could only be done by creating conditions in which the business in the State could continue to invest without siphoning of capital to other States.

III

CPI(M) IN GOVERNMENT AND LABOUR POLICY

The CPI(M) led Left Front Government assumed office in 1977. CPI(M) being the leading partner in the front automatically occupied the major portfolios. Jyoti Basu who was the Deputy Chief Minister in the United Front coalition governments of the 1960s and 1970, was chosen to head the Ministry. Basu was then the Vice-President of the CITU all-India CITU. Krishna Pada Ghosh, member of the Working Committee of CITU headed the labour ministry.

The CITU President B.T. Ranadive greeted its members on this occasion by saying:

The CITU greets the victory of the Left alliance in West Bengal which has inflicted a crushing defeat on the Congress....We greet our Comrade Jyoti Basu, Vice-President of the CITU, who now heads the West Bengal ministry. We greet our Comrade Krishna Pada Ghosh, member of our Working Committee who now heads the labour ministry in West Bengal.39

The CITU President expressed faith that “the new ministry will initiate measures for the relief of the working class”, who had suffered “mass retrenchments, increased workload, lay off, mass unemployment, impounding of D.A., denial of bonus, wage freezes, rising prices”,40 since the days of the semi-fascist terror in West Bengal. All this to him have intensified the working class misery beyond measure. He also felt that the working class must mobilise support for the ministerial measures to provide relief to the people.

38 S. Khanna, n. 16.
40 Ibid.
There were qualitative changes in the orientation of the Government towards labour policy. These changes were highlighted by the labour minister in his budget speech in the month of September 1977:

Since the formation of the Left Front Government it has been my constant endeavour to give a new orientation to the work of this department in favour of the working class. The Left Front Government of West Bengal is committed as a matter of policy to see that injustice done to the workers and employees during the emergency is reversed and remedied. The present Left Front Government will give all our support to the workers legitimate demands and struggles. The government would ensure freedom of trade union functioning for everybody - irrespective of political affiliation and ideology - and will not allow the police and anti-social elements to interfere in trade union struggles.

The main measures of the Government since then had been to provide relief to the workers and employees. These measures are mainly: support to the workers in their just, legitimate and democratic demands which involved the restoration of trade union and democratic rights, secondly, using the State conciliatory machinery for the purpose of disposal of disputes in the workers interest and favour, and keeping the police administration neutral during disputes. We shall discuss these three measures of the government in details in the above order.

Government and Trade Union Rights

For all practical purposes democratic rights and more particularly trade union rights were suspended by the Congress Government during the emergency and earlier. The first task of the Government therefore in the labour front was the restoration of trade union rights including the right to strike. The Labour Minister, Mr. Krishna Pada Ghosh stated in September 1977 after assuming office:

.....This government will ensure freedom of trade union functioning for everybody - irrespective of political affiliation and ideology - and will not allow the police and anti-social elements to interfere in trade union struggles.

The Government, however, took a pragmatic decision on strikes as a weapon of the workers. It was decided that though strikes would be resorted to but only as a last resort. This decision was made clear by the Labour Minister later on in 1981:

It is the considered view of the Government that strike could be resorted to as the last weapon when all other methods fail to achieve the desired result.

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41 Budget Speech by the Labour Minister, Government of West Bengal in the month of September, 1977. The budget speech was quoted from the Government of West Bengal, Department of Labour, Labour in West Bengal, 1977, p. 2.
42 Ibid.
This kind of decision was necessary keeping in view the experiences of the first and second United Front ministries. Certain amount of caution and restraint was actually called our understanding is that this approach of the party and the Government on the use of strikes as a weapon of the workers arouse from two reasons. First was that the Government level institutions could be used in an ineffective way to improve the condition of the workers. Strikes hence would be needed only sparsely. The second was a more real understanding of the stagnant industrial sector. It felt that encouragement of militant struggle like that of the 1960s could lead to a further deterioration of the industrial situation. The first and the second are compatible with each other. Better industrial climate could lead to a better living condition of the industrial worker. Thus the Chief Minister's and Labour Minister's appeal "that strikes should only be sparingly used".

What was the result of this measure? The trade union movement which was under subdued condition during the emergency flourished again after the change in the political atmosphere.

The labour department claimed in 1978:

...The working class too found the circumstances too congenial to carry on their day to day movement with a considerable degree of freedom. The changed situation gave a fillip to the trade union movement for realisation of the demands and redress of the grievances of the workers, which resulted in a large number of industrial action. Consequently, there was a rise in the incidence of strikes.

This claim was for the year 1977. The report further pointed out:

This redeeming feature of the industrial relations could perhaps be attributed to a sense of moderation and responsibility on the part of the working class...behaved with admirable restraint and a sense of maturity.

The claim for the year 1978 was almost similar:

The industrial relations situation during the year remained generally satisfactory. In keeping with the Government's policy trade unions were encouraged to function democratically and to promote the lawful and democratic rights of the workmen.44

It claimed further:

The trade unions in turn displayed a rare degree of maturity and a sense of responsibility for ensuring industrial peace.

44 Government of West Bengal, Department of Labour, Labour in West Bengal, 1977, p.3.
...The cases of lockout registered a slight rise but there was a drop in cases of strike.\textsuperscript{45}

Thus immediately after the assumption of office by the Left Front in 1977, what followed was an era of responsible trade union activity. Unions functioned democratically in a new political atmosphere, trade unions remained subdued for a long time during the emergency became active and launched movements for the realisation of their just demands. But it eschewed ultimate forms of struggle such as gherao, etc. and hence the industrial relations situation became "satisfactory".

The labour department reported a decline in the number of gheraos.

After four years in Office, the Labour Minister in 1981 elaborated the achievement of his Government in this regard in the following way:

Immediately after assuming power, the Left Front Government fully restored all the trade union rights including the rights to strike and form union.

He further elaborated:

The existence of a friendly government sympathetic to the cause of the workers, resulted in tremendous advance of trade union movement in the state during the last four years. Still there was in general peace in the working class front.\textsuperscript{46}

Though the State Labour Minister and other officials expressed satisfaction over the general labour scene and the policy which is pursued, but there were critiques to this kind of policy. Ajit Roy criticised the policy in the pages of Economic and Political Weekly in the following words:

Ever since it came to power, one of the main preoccupations of the Left Front Government has been how to keep the industrial workers on leash. While a certain amount of caution and restraint was actually called for so as to avoid the excess of spontaneous and sporadic gheraos of the late sixties, the total cease-fire on the trade union front that has been in operation for the last six months with the full blessings of the CPI(M) leadership cannot be justified by any tactical considerations.\textsuperscript{47}

Whatever are the criticisms, what is clearly visibly is that the major trade unions affiliated to the parties of the Left Front had given top priority to negotiated or mediated settlement of disputes. Unions have taken recourse to strikes whenever they have felt it absolutely essential and when other methods have failed to achieve the desired results. Strikes have taken place, they have prolonged for long periods and have ended with achievements of the workers in the State. This we

\textsuperscript{45} ibid, pp. 5-6.
have seen to some extent in our previous chapter on trade union mobilisation. What needs to be pointed out is that negotiated settlement of disputes in workers' favour have been given more importance at the policy level. Let us end our discussion on this issue by quoting from R. Chatterjee, a long time observer on labour politics in West Bengal. To him:

...bipartite settlements, government intervention when bipartism fails, illegality of gherao, emphasis on industrial peace, and the plea that strikes are means of last resort have remained the guiding principles of action in this field.48

**Disposal of Disputes in Workers' Favour:**

The Labour Department of the new Government in 1977 received 6,192 industrial disputes, out of which 2,959 disputes were brought from the previous year. The Government claimed in 1978 that:

...of the total number of disputes handled during the year, 5,211 cases (65.94 per cent) were disposed of in the year under review (1977).49

The new government had assumed office in mid-1977. The above figures are for the whole year. If one looks at the number of disputes disposed off by the conciliation machinery one finds that it was during the second half of the 1977 more disputes (in terms of percentage) was disposed off. These included disputes including strikes, lockouts and closures. The very next year, the Labour Department of the Government handled, 10,669 cases. And the Department claimed that:

Out of the total disputes dealt with 6,487 (60.80 per cent) cases were disposed off during the year 1978 as against 5,218 (56.92 per cent) during the previous year.50

Out of this total disputes dealt with 1,652 disputes were settled through the conciliation machinery of the Labour Department. In terms of percentage, it was 25.47 per cent of the total disputes settled. The number of cases handled by the Government increased in 1983, but the percentage of cases which the Government settled went down and even the percentage of cases which was settled by the conciliation machinery went down. The Labour Department reported:

During the year 1983, the conciliation machinery of the State Government handled 10,020 industrial disputes including those involving strikes, lockouts and closures out of which 5,455 disputes were raised during the year and 4,565

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50 ibid., 1978, p. 5.
disputes brought forward from the previous year. 5,289 (52.78 per cent) disputes were disposed off in the year under review.\textsuperscript{31}

...the conciliation machinery settled 20.72 per cent of the cases during the year 1983 against 23.78 per cent in the previous year.

Similarly in 1985, the State conciliation machinery handled 9,451 industrial disputes including those involving strikes, lockouts and closures out of which 5,258 disputes were raised during the year and 4,193 disputes were brought forward from the previous year. 5,047 (53.40%) disputes were disposed off in the year. "Out of this total number of disputes settled, 1,048, that is around 20.77 per cent of the total were settled through the conciliation machinery."\textsuperscript{32}

In a similar way, if one looks at the reports of the Labour Department, one finds that the conciliation machinery of the Labour Department have handled a number of disputes among employers and employees and out of this it had been successful in disposing of a large number of disputes every year mostly in favour of the workers. It is because of this biasedness that the employers do not refer cases to the State Government’s labour conciliation machinery, despite demands from the unions and workers. What therefore had followed in bipartite meetings and agreements in which the employers had coerced the workers and unions during negotiations. Bipartite agreements or negotiations are dangerous because workers had to compromise with their interests. The Left Front Government had raised its voice against this kind of settlements, but have failed to check bipartism. Bipartite agreements have usually followed long periods of closures and lockouts and it is generally after a period of starvation that the workers and the unions accept bipartite negotiations as a method of reconciliation and thus accept the dictates of the employers.

Neutrality of the Police Administration during Disputes:

Complete restoration of democratic rights of the people and more particularly the trade union rights of the working class required that the bureaucratic police administration is kept neutral during disputes involving workers and the employers. During the emergency and also during the earlier Congress Government, the police open sided with the employers and hence unions and workers had to confront brutal attacks from the police. Since the CPI(M) had suffered most from this machinery throughout the years from 1972 onwards, therefore the Party in Government decided to neutralise the Police administration during disputes. The Labour Minister in 1977 said:

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 1983, p. 1.
This Government will ensure freedom of trade union functioning for everybody - irrespective of political affiliation and ideology - and will not allow the Police and anti-social elements to interfere in trade union struggles. 53

In the mid of 1981, the Minister claimed success in this direction:

In the matter of industrial disputes, the Police and the administration were directed to keep themselves neutral. Their duty is to see that the disputes are settled peacefully in favour of the workers. Thus the practice in force for the last thirty years, when in the matter of disputes between the employers and the employees, the Police and the administration in variably sided with the employers against the workers, was reversed. 54

This achievement of the Left Front Government was hailed by the CITU President B.T. Ranadive in May 1981:

There is no Police firings against striking workers, there is no Police intervention against the workers and the people to support the capitalists.... 55

There was a need for keeping the bureaucratic Police apparatus in check. The CPI(M) led Left Front Government had to a lot of extent done so particularly when the workers were involved in a dispute with the employers. Incidence of Police actions against the workers in favour of the employers are only rare in West Bengal. This is what is accepted by the left trade unions in the State as well as many Marxist scholars on labour politics in West Bengal. Police to a large extent had remained neutral in disputes, though there are instances that the Police had fired or lathi charged the workers. The left unions including the CITU and the CPI(M) leaders have justified this by saying that only in cases where the workers had created law and order problems, in order to safeguard property and life, the Police had taken such kind of actions. This measure and action by the Left Front Government not to intervene in matters of industrial disputes involving workers and employers, in which to a large extent it has been successful comes from an understanding that the Police and other bureaucratic set up needs to be handled properly for providing maximum relief to the working people. This is because a democratic and secure atmosphere is necessary for the purpose of democratic functioning of trade unions. This line of the government is consistent with, and part and parcel of, the line of encouraging class struggle.

54 K.P. Ghosh, n.32.
CPI(M) IN GOVERNMENT AND JUTE WORKERS

The approach of the Government since 1977 to jute workers is a part and parcel of its general approach to workers as a whole in the State. We have stated earlier that the industry enjoys a predominant position in the State not only because of its size or contribution to the State's economy but also because of the number of workers it employs. It employs around 2 to 2.5 lakh workers, including quasi permanent workers. It is this huge workforce which have drawn the attention of the Left Front Government considerably since 1977. The Government have taken interest in both the problems of the industry and the abject condition of the workers in the industry. In this section we shall discuss the efforts of the Government led by the CPI(M) to promote measures to solve the grievances of the mill workers and provide relief to them and by doing this it considered that it will bring the workers closer to the party. It also sought to solve grievances for facilitating mobilisation from below by its trade union wing in the industry, the BCMU affiliated to the CITU. We shall divide the whole discussion in few sub-sections. In the first, an attempt will be made to analyse the ministerial measures which the Government had provided for the rejuvenation of the entire industry. This is important because the condition of the industry have a direct bearing on the condition of the workers, since in the eventuality of a closure the workers have to face the problem of unemployment. In the second sub-section, we shall analyse the direct measures and interventions of the State Government for improving the condition of the workers. This will include a broad range of measures including progressive legislation, use of pressure on the millowners during disputes and keeping the police administration neutral during disputes between jute workers and millowners.

The Government's emphasis on nationalisation of the entire industry can be made out from the fact that in the 1980s, the Government passed resolutions in the legislative assembly for the nationalisation of the entire industry. The resolutions were passed despite objections from the major opposition in the State, the Congress. The MLAs belonging to the Left parties even once put up a dharna in the boat club to draw the attention of the Centre on this issue and put pressure on the Central Government for nationalisation. Despite this demand by the State Government,

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nationalisation of the entire industry had remained a distant dream. After some earlier doses of nationalisation in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Centre has refused to accept the demand of the State Government to nationalise the industry outrightly on the plea that outright nationalisation would not solve the problem of the industry as such. It is this resistance by the Central Government which have made the CPI(M) led Left Front Government to temporarily tone down on this issue. Hence, this demand had taken a back seat in the later years particularly after the mid 1980s.

It is under this circumstances, the CPI(M) led government have given the slogan of opening up of closed mills, modernisation and diversification of the mills to make it more competitive etc. It must be pointed out here that in the first 10 years of the Left Front rule, these demands were put forward alongside the main demand for nationalisation. For the above, “opening up of closed mills” the government had used its reconciliation machinery of the labour department to dispose of disputes between the employers and the workers and open up as many mills as possible. In this, it had succeeded only partially. And for the second that is for the “modernisation and diversification” of the mills, it had pressed on the Central Government to provide financial assistance to the sick and weak mills in the industry. This approach of the Government is in conformity with the Government’s decision to provide relief to the workers because for keeping the existing employment of the workers it is necessary that the mills remain in operation fully. It became imperative for the Government, therefore, to demand for the survival of the industry because of the growth of incidence of lockouts and suspension of work by millowners since the second half of the 1980s.

In this regard, it must be pointed out that the Left Front Government since 1977 had tried to avoid closures and had similarly tried to open the mills lying under lockouts with the active intervention of its labour department. In the year 1977, the Government faced no cases of lockout or closure in the industry, though after the inception of the Government the working class launched movements for their just and legitimate demands. Lockouts became an increasing feature in the jute mills in the year 1978. The labour department reported:

Long drawn cases of lockouts in some jute mills led to a great extent to an increase in loss of mandays during 1978.56

56 Government of West Bengal, Department of Labour, n.31, p.9.
The labour department of the Government therefore had to contend the case of lockout in the jute mills more severely, though some jute mills were under lockout since earlier periods. Serious efforts by the Government's labour department led to settling of several cases of lockouts in the industry. The Calcutta Jute Manufacturing Co., the Naihati Jute Mill Co., the Naskarpura Jute Mill, the Northbrook Jute Mill, the Waverely Jute Mill, the Kanoria Jute Mill, the Kelvin Jute Mill and the Baranagore Jute Factory, all of them which employed more than 1000 workers; in some cases more than 3000 workers and which were lying under lockouts for various periods were settled by the reconciliation machinery of the labour department. Out of these settlements, the settlement of the Naihati Jute Mill dated 28.8.1978 was the most important one because of the terms of settlement from which the workers were the only gainers. The Naihati Jute Mill was under lockout from 21.07.1977. The tripartite settlement which was signed was on 28.08.1978. The reconciliation machinery played an important role in signing the settlement. The major points of the terms of settlement included lifting of the lockout in phased manner, withdrawal of disciplinary proceedings in connection with lockout, payment of an advance of Rs.250/- to the workmen who worked during the period of the lockout and payment of bonus for the eligible workers.57

In 1979 the reconciliation machinery was engaged in handling the industrywide strike which had been called by the workers and which continued for 50 days. Most of the work stoppages in the industry was because of the long drawn strikes and the government virtually forced the millowners represented by the IJMA to arrive at a settlement which benefited the workers. The pressure which the State labour department was able to put on the millowners will be discussed elsewhere in this chapter. In the years 1980, 1981, 1982 and 1983, the labour department's reconciliation machinery could not achieve much success though there were work stoppages in the industry due to both strikes and lockouts. In 1983 in the jute industry there were 21 cases of lockout affecting 82,000 workmen. In the year 1984, the reconciliation machinery was again involved in settling the industrywide strike which continued for 84 days. It was in the year 1985 that the reconciliation machinery of the State Government achieved a major achievement.

57 ibid., pp. 40-41.
when it was able to open 17 jute mills under lockout. The labour department blamed the
management for the lockouts. The report of the department stated:

The responsibility of lockout in the jute industry rested with the management
who tried to solve their problems at the cost of the workers. 58

Out of the 17 mills, some of the mills like Gourishankar and Northbrook were under lockout since
1981 and 1982 respectively. The labour department while functioning noted its limitation also in
the report. It stated in 1985:

Some employers of jute mills have kept their units under lockout for a long
period without formally declaring or applying for closure in order to avoid
payment of closure benefits, etc. Some have also been resolving to suspension
of normal working of the mills and factories without declaring formal lockout or
closure of their units in which case the workmen had to attend their workplaces
but go without wages. Owing to some lacunae in the ID Act the reconciliation
machinery finds it very difficult to intervene and give relief to the workmen. 59

With the above limitation, the labour department continued to function and in 1988 the
reconciliation machinery was able to negotiate with the millowners and workers an industrywide
settlement without the workers resorting to strike. This was for the first time that the Government
was able to pressurise the millowners to sign an agreement with the Unions and avert a strike in the
industry. The reconciliation machinery performed perfectly during the 1992 industrywide strike.
Thus the party had used the Government offices of the labour department in order to dispose of
disputes and had constantly endeavoured to keep open the mills so that the mill workers remain
off from the problem of unemployment. To some extent the party has also succeeded in opening
up mills which went under lockout causing suffering to the workers employed.

Government's approach to jute labour

As early as in 1979 the Labour Minister Mr. Krishnapada Ghosh in an address to the
Indian Jute Mills Association spelled out the approach of the Government on labour in general and
jute labour in particular. He said:

We in the Government, representing the working class have sympathy towards
labour, and we want to protect the interest of that class to the extent it is possible
under the existing set up. I say existing set up because from the activities of the
Government you can really understood that it would not only help the working
class to achieve their rightful claims, their wages, improvement in their living
conditions but would also help you to the extent as far it is possible for us. 60

58 Government of West Bengal, Department of Labour, n.38, p.6
59 ibid., p.7.
60 K.P. Ghosh, Labour Minister of West Bengal stated this in an annual conference of IJMA
Earlier in a conference of the BCMU (Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union), the General Secretary of the BCMU had expressed his “full confidence that the Left Front Government will protect the interests of the working class, peasantry and the toiling masses and called upon the jute workers to foil the conspiracies of the vested interests to discredit the Left Front Government”. In order to garner support from the jute workers the Chief Minister who was present in the meeting pointed out “that the Left Front Government is the symbol of the hopes and aspirations of the toiling masses of not only of West Bengal but also of other States”. And appealed to them “to defend the Left Front Government with all their might against these conspiracies”. The Labour Minister Mr. K.P. Ghosh, however, cautioned the working class by saying that “the establishment of Left Front Government does not mean that all their demands will be achieved without struggles. Only their organised strength and united struggle can realise the demands. The Left Front Government will always support their struggle for just demands”. The approach, therefore, of the CPI(M) had been to use the institutions available to it at the State level for the betterment of the conditions of the jute labour but it felt also that without struggle, major success would not be coming. This approach arose from the understanding that the big business in the country could only be pressurised to a limited extent through legislation and other forms of pressure tactics since the State have very little control over industry as such. The Chief Minister explained the position in the following words:

> It has been our experience that progressive legislation alone cannot bring about the desired results in the present administrative set up. Therefore, land legislation, distribution of surplus land ... implementation of minimum wages ... cannot become effective without active co-operation of powerful mass organisations of kisans...Government’s attention must be drawn to legitimate issues through mass actions but strikes may be necessary to enforce their demands.

The emphasis was clearly on as we have seen earlier on progressive legislation for providing relief to the jute workers than on the second. The Chief Minister pointed out:

> The Ministers and the departments must also so conduct themselves that there may not be any cause for strike. They must also maintain close contact with employer’s organisations which support us.\(^{61}\)

> Why this priority on legislation and other forms of pressures to ameliorate the condition of the workers? The reason could be the condition of the industry as such. The Government had

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realised that the condition of the jute industry was not similar to as it was in the 1960s. The
condition of the industry is not so bad as the captains of the industry had painted, but it had
deteriorated significantly over the years. Several problems which are genuine in nature. It has its
own genuine set of problems. Given this fact the CPI(M) in Government had taken a very cautious
attitude. It has realised that the condition of the workers largely depend on the health of the
industry. Hence the approach had been to protect the health of the industry so that the interest of
the workers do not suffer significantly. We have discussed this to some extent earlier.

Giving priority to progressive legislation and negotiations, however, never meant that the
Government which claims to be the Government of the working class and toiling masses would not
support in case strikes and dharnas are resorted to by the workers. The Chief Minister explained
the stand on the workers in the following words:

......we stand by them in their legitimate struggles unlike in Congress times,
when the Government generally supported the managements.

But reminded them that:

Whilst fighting for demands and even during strikes, the behaviour of the
workers is important. They should be hard bargains and be firm but they should
avoid unseemly behaviour. 62

Supporting the workers during disputes by the Left Front Government meant keeping the
police administration neutral during strikes and taking the side of the workers during negotiations
in the striking period. Let us elaborate these two points in brief.

Police neutrality during strikes

We have seen earlier that the Government wanted to stand by the workers during disputes
and to keep this class biasedness, what was required was to keep the police administration neutral
during strikes. The Government tried to keep the police administration neutral. This was
definitely new in the context of West Bengal because earlier under the Congress Government,
police interference in disputes in the jute mills was something very common. The police
administration in those cases sided openly with the managements and helped managements in
breaking strikes and resistance of the workers. The Chief Minister Mr. J. Basu in the conference
of the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union in 1978 had assured the jute workers that “police would not
be used to interfere in the workers strike. And true to his promise the police administration was

62 Ibid.
kept neutral throughout the industrywide strikes in the jute industry between 1977-1992. During these periods, major strikes in the industry took place in 1979, 1984 and in 1992. The strike in the industry was averted in 1988 when for the first time the IJMA accepted the demands of the BCMU without an industrywide strike.

The first major industrywide strike was in 1979. The strike started after tripartite negotiations failed. When the strike started the PWD Minister Mr. Jatin Chakraborty said:

On behalf of the Left Front Government, the workers would find the police on their side.

He stated further:

Workers do not go on strike for fun. They are forced to by stubborn owners. 63

He also reported to have said that the absence of police pickets in front of the closed gates of the jute mills in Titagarh, Naihati belt was evidence that the State Government supported labour. And in the absence of police pickets no untoward incident was reported throughout the jute mill areas. This is an indication that the Left Front Government was able to hold or refrain the police from interfering in the dispute between the millowners and the workers during the strike of 1979. Throughout the strike period of 50 days no untoward incident occurred, the police also did not intervene in the dispute. The strike was peaceful - this was reported by Mr. Sisir Ganguly, President, West Bengal Pradesh National Trade Union. He reported on the third day after his tours in the jute mill areas that "the strike was total and peaceful". 64 The State labour situation was also free of any tension, this was reported by the leaders of the Central Trade Unions. The Statesman reported on January 13, 1979:

Leaders of the Central organisations are happy that though several strikes involving nearly 3 lakh workers are continuing the labour situation in the State is free of tension. They maintain that this has been possible because all the major trade unions have been able to act in unison, "in the interests of the workers" despite their different political affiliations. 65

Two meanings can be derived from this description of tension free situation. Firstly, workers completely restrained themselves and did not indulge in violence and secondly, the police was not used or use of police was restrained. One thing must be remembered that it is even in peaceful times or peaceful labour situation, the police may resort to violence. Thus, the strike of

64 Ibid., January 22, 1979.
1979 passed off without any police interference. The strike continued for 50 days but police was instructed by the Government not to interfere.

The industrywide strike of 1984 began on the 16th of January. It was called by 14 Central Trade Unions. The Statesman reported after the first day of the strike:

According to the IJMA all the 52 jute mills including the five under the management of the National Jute Manufacturers' Corporation, were affected by the strike. About 2,50,000 workers were employed in these mills. There was no incidence during the day.

Demonstrations were held during the strike in front of the IJMA office in Calcutta, but police was not to have any work. The Statesman reported on the demonstration:

Several thousand jute mill workers demonstrated before the IJMA office in Calcutta on Thursday. A Calcutta police spokesman said during the day that the demonstrations demanded among other things the immediate reopening of the mills in the State.

What needed to be emphasised is that during the entire strike period of 84 days, no incidence of police with workers was reported. This could be because workers did not indulge in violence, but a police action could also take place and do take place even at normal times. This had taken place even in West Bengal prior to 1977. Incidence of police action was not even reported during the strike of 1992, except in cases where workers, a section of workers indulged in looting and forceful destruction of property. The later cannot be cited as a case when police sided with the management.

Thus, the police administration has been kept neutral and during strikes, it had not interfered and taken the side of the management. This was reported even during interviews with Union leaders. A former BCMU leader in the Chengail area said:

There was police repression earlier (prior to 1977). Now there are no repression. Though the police intervened in some cases like in Victoria and Gourishankar and Kanoria (more recently) police lathi charged but it was only because a section of the workers broke the labour office and destroyed some records. The lathi charge and firing was not intentional.

Another leader of the BCMU, Mr. Gopal Biswas when asked, said:

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68 Interview with Panchu Basu, former BCMU leader, now a member of Marxist Communist Party of India. The interview was taken on 17.11.1996.
During the Congress regime, if there was any movement there was repression. Struggles are being launched at least 10 times more now, but repression is very less. Only if there is law and order problem, the police intervenes.69

The above views are not shared by all, particularly by the Union leaders not belonging to the Left Front, but our observation is that the police do it openly, interferes during struggles of the working taking the side of the management. Reports of police repression during movements of the jute workers are not to be found in the industry.

The Left Front Government and negotiations

It has been argued earlier that the Government had taken a stance of supporting workers during strikes and other forms of struggles or disputes. Pressurising the employers, i.e. the IJMA during the course of negotiations more particularly in tripartite negotiations clearly became the main strategy of the Left Front Government. The Government have taken this approach to see that all disputes gets settled in the workers charter of demand. Thus, it not only sought to use the reconciliation machinery of the labour department but it intended to use the machinery in support of the workers, the jute workers to be more particular since 1977. Let us look at how the government had done it, throughout the years after 1977.

One of the earlier disputes between the millowners and the jute workers was on the issue of bonus. The Janata Government after coming to power at the Centre had passed the Ordinance, the “Payment of bonus (Amendment) Ordinance, 1977”. Through this Ordinance, it raised the minimum statutory bonus from 4 per cent to 8.33 per cent. This amount though was an increase from 4 per cent but the 8.33 per cent was equal to what the Indira Gandhi Government had accepted once. The IJMA pleaded its inability to pay the statutory minimum due to its financial burden and prayed to the Government for non-payment of the same. The Government during negotiations took a decision that the mill management must pay bonus to the workers at the statutory minimum of 8.33 per cent. The Chief Minister is reported to have said to the representatives of the IJMA:

You may borrow or steal money to meet the bonus obligation.70

The Labour Minister also took a tough stand on the issue and sided with the worker. The Labour Minister was negotiating directly with the millowners. The ultimate result of this pressure

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69 Interview with Gopal Biswas, prominent BCMU and CPI (M) leader. Interview was taken on 18.11.1996.
was that the bonus obligation was met by the millowners, though some millowners only accepted to pay in instalments. The Government had taken similar stand throughout, it had attempted to pressurise the millowners to meet the bonus obligations every year, though in more recent times it had not been much successful in this regard. More particularly, the Government have failed to pressurise the small millowners to accept and pay the minimum bonus obligation.

The first major dispute after the Left Front assumed office took place in 1979. The strike of 1979 continued for 50 days. Immediately after the strike notice was served by Unions, the Government invited all the parties concerned; the JJMA and workers represented through Central trade unions to the negotiating table and tripartite negotiations continued. This was not the practice during the Congress Government’s rule. Most of the talks which were convened by Mr. Krishna Pada Ghosh, the State Labour Minister to avert the strike failed. And it is during this talks Mr. Ghosh showed his class biasness and tried to settle the issue on the workers’ charter of demand and held the employers responsible for the strike after the talks failed. Even during the strike, the Labour Minister convened tripartite meetings and tried to settle the dispute, though the Minister was firm that the “onus of settling the strike was with the management”. The Chief Minister also intervened and finally an agreement was reached after 50 days. Thus, the strike continued for 50 days. Now it is known that in the course of the strike, the Government was to bring tremendous pressure on the millowners to accept a settlement which the workers hailed as a major victory. The editorial of the Statesman read:

No industry can hope to hold out against the kind of intense official pressure that was brought to bear on the 60 mills during the 49 day closure. This was not so much a strike as a show of strength between West Bengal’s Left Front Government and the Indian Jute Mills Associations, its conclusion is therefore bound to be noted with interest by workers in other industries as well....nor can it had taken into consideration the likely impact on industrial stability of a precedent in which demonstrating workers enjoyed the support of politicians and police in a manner reminiscent of some of the happenings under the two United Front regime.71

Pressure was thus applied by the Left Front Government during the industrial disputes so that the dispute end in favour of the workers. The BCMU congratulated the Left Front Government for putting immense pressure on the millowners. The BCMU President and General Secretary stated:

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70 Reported in the Capita, n.d.
The Left Front Government proved to the hilt for all to see that the Government is their Government, standing firmly by the side of the workers in their strike struggle against the most tough and powerful section of monopoly capitalists viz. the jute barons. It is a glowing tribute to the Left Front Government that through relentless pressure on the employers, it could make them yield and bring about a settlement which justifies the workers on all the counts they fought for.\footnote{ibid., p. 7.}

The resolution which was adopted by the Central trade unions after the strike in 1979 thanked the Labour Minister and the Chief Minister in the following words:

...This meeting also thanks the Chief Minister and Labour Minister of this State for accepting the justice of the workers demand and for siding with them both before and after the strike.\footnote{ibid., p. 7.}

The pressure applied by the Left Front Government during industrial strikes could be substantiated further from other major disputes in the industry. We have seen earlier that the strike of 1984 in many senses was a continuation of the 1979 strike. The strike was to come into effect from the 16\textsuperscript{th} of January 1984. The Labour Minister Mr. K.P. Ghosh after the strike notice was served, convened a bipartite meeting and finally convened a tripartite meeting to avert the indefinite strike call. There was immense pressure from the Minister who rejected the proposals of the IJMA outside the charter of demands of the workers. And finally the IJMA accepted most of the demands of the workers after 84 day strike in the mills. The agreement though was a victory for the workers, still there were criticisms to the Government’s approach. Mr. Fatick Ghosh of the UTUC described the agreement as a “conspiracy between the Government and the IJMA to betray the jute workers”.\footnote{Report in the Statesman, April 8, 1984.} However, the BCMU General Secretary stated:

...The impasse was resolved by the intervention of the Chief Minister, Government of West Bengal who evolved a formula to resolve it. He further stated:

...The sympathy and protection extended by the Left Front Government of West Bengal has been of decisive importance.\footnote{BCMU, Jute Workers Marching Ahead: Memorandum of Settlement in the Jute Industry of 9.4.1988, pp. ii-iii.}

The resolution which was adopted at the joint central rally at Sahid Minar read as following:

The intervention of the Chief Minister has helped in sorting out all the hindrances in the way of settlement including the decision to pay Rs.100/- as settlement money to all workmen on roll before the strike. The rally

\textsuperscript{72} BCMU, 50 Days strike of jute workers: Memorandum of Settlement, dated 22\textsuperscript{nd} February 1979, p.3.  
\textsuperscript{73} BCMU, 50 Days strike of jute workers: Memorandum of Settlement, dated 22\textsuperscript{nd} February 1979, p.3.  
\textsuperscript{74} Report in the Statesman, April 8, 1984.  
\textsuperscript{75} BCMU, Jute Workers Marching Ahead: Memorandum of Settlement in the Jute Industry of 9.4.1988, pp. ii-iii.
congratulates the State Government for its efforts to bring about a settlement of the issues....76

No major strike took place in the industry between 1985-1991. A major strike was to take place only in 1992. In between this period, a 74 day strike took place in 1987 in the six nationalised jute mills. It ended with gains for the workers after the personal intervention of the Chief Minister. The 1988 industrywide strike was averted because an agreement was reached earlier. The State Government had not much role to play. A industrywide strike was to take place only in 1992 after tripartite negotiations failed. The agreement was signed after 50 days of strike in the industry and the personal intervention of the Chief Minister and the Labour Minister. The NUJW leaders criticised the Government’s attitude on the dispute. Chandrama, the NUJW during an interview stated:

The Government did not do anything during the strike for the workers; otherwise the strike would not have continued for 50 days. It could have been settled in a much lesser time.77

Despite this kind of criticisms, it can be substantiated that the Left Front Government had used its good offices for the purpose of pressurising the millowners during disputes involving the millowners and the jute workers particularly during strikes. As a result, most of the strikes have ended in significant victories for the workers, though chiefly the victories were because of the gallant struggle of the workers. It appears that the ability of the State Government to settle disputes in favour of the workers declined if not significantly but to a considerable extent since the mid 1980s when the millowners started using the weapon of lockout and suspension of work. Closures and lockouts have put the State Government in a disadvantageous position. Moreover, bipartite agreements are being signed in individual mills even by trade unions belonging to the Front partners and this have definitely eroded the powers and prestige of the State Government because it does not involve it altogether in the negotiations.

76 Ibid., pp. vi-vii.
77 Interview with Chandrama, leader NUJW. Interview was taken on 28.10.1996.