

Indian Prime Minister Modi to tout pro-business record at World Economic Forum

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India's pro-business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) prime minister, the Hindu-communalist strongman Narendra Modi, is to give the opening keynote address today at the 2018 World Economic Forum (WEF).

This annual forum, where the world's billionaire oligarchs, CEOs, big business government and party leaders and celebrities hobnob together in the resort town of Davos, Switzerland, will culminate with a closing address by US President Donald Trump on Friday.

Thus the WEF deliberations are to be bookended by speeches from Modi, who first came to all-Indian and world attention when, as Gujarat's chief minister, he presided in 2002 over an anti-Muslim pogrom, and the fascist-minded real estate mogul Trump, who in recent months has repeatedly threatened to annihilate the people of North Korea.

Although a meeting between Modi and Trump has yet to be confirmed publicly, there is much media speculation the two leaders will organize their travel so as to have a tête-à-tête in Davos. The two have publicly pledged to take the burgeoning Indo-US military-strategic alliance to a "new level."

Under Modi, India has emerged as a veritable frontline state in Washington's drive to encircle, strategically isolate, and prepare for war against China. The Modi government has parroted the US line on the South China Sea, where the US has repeatedly conducted provocative "freedom of navigation" exercises, supported Trump's war-mongering against North Korea, and expanded cooperation with the leading US allies in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia and Japan.

India has opened its military ports and airports to US battleships and warplanes, and taken advantage of the Trump administration's support to recklessly escalate tensions with its regional nuclear-armed rival, Pakistan. This, together with India's integration into the US-led anti-China alliance, has dramatically intensified the war danger across the Indo-Pacific region.

Modi's address will be the first time an Indian Prime

Minister has opened the WEF, and just the second time the head of government has attended since 1997. Indian big business and the corporate-controlled media has enthused over this, rightly interpreting the invitation to Modi to open the world's most prestigious gathering of the European and North American ruling elites as an endorsement of his pro-US and pro-business record.

Modi is being accompanied by a large 129-person delegation, with over 100 Indian CEOs and six cabinet ministers, including Finance Minister Arun Jaitley. In close partnership with Modi, Jaitley has spearheaded a non-stop drive over the past four years to implement a broad range of pro-business legislation at the expense of the working and middle classes. Although Modi will be in Switzerland for only two days, his cabinet colleagues from the finance, commerce, external affairs, railways, petroleum and natural gas ministries are all slated to stay on and exhort businesses to invest in India.

The Indian delegation is the fourth largest, after the American with over 780 delegates, the British with close to 270, and that of the host country, Switzerland.

The Modi government has accelerated pro-market reforms, including privatization and subsidy cuts, while imposing, in the name of reducing the deficit-to-GDP ratio, sweeping social spending cuts.

At the same time, the BJP is whipping up Hindu chauvinism, in a calculated attempt to divert mounting social tensions due to chronic poverty, joblessness and levels of social inequality that rival those of the British Raj. The Modi government is systematically placing Hindu supremacist ideologues in the leadership of the country's educational and cultural institutions, while denouncing even its establishment critics as "anti-national."

In a move meant to rouse the BJP's Hindu right base, Modi last March named Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu mahant (high priest) notorious for inciting anti-Muslim violence, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. He immediately launched a campaign against so-called illegal slaughterhouses, targeting an industry that provides

employment and cheap protein to poor Muslims and Dalits (the former Untouchables). Emboldened by these moves, BJP-allied Hindu extremists have carried out a wave of violent attacks, including lynchings, against minorities.

Modi's main focus at the WEF will be to promote his "Make in India" campaign, touting the country as a ready source of cheap labour and a haven for business investment. Modi has repeatedly boasted that, on average, industrial wages in India are no more than one-quarter those in China. This is the result of the pro-corporate and anti-worker policies pursued by successive governments, including those led by the Congress Party. Last year, 13 Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant workers were sentenced to life in prison in a crude frame-up, supported by both the BJP and Congress, and aimed at assuring investors that the Indian state will intervene to crush worker resistance to precarious employment, low wages, and brutal working conditions.

The Davos trip has been accompanied by a loud publicity campaign extolling the steps taken by the Modi government to enhance the "ease of doing business."

In the lead-up to the trip, the BJP government announced a slew of new economic "reforms" including allowing 100 percent foreign ownership without government approval in single-brand retail and, as part of an accelerated disinvestment (privatization) campaign, plans to break up and sell off a 49 percent share of Air India.

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In a media briefing prior to Modi's trip to Davos, a spokesperson for India's External Affairs ministry, Vijay Gokhale, declared, "The central message the prime minister will give is that India is open and ready to do business in a big way. We want to tell the world to come and invest in India."

To this end, on his arrival on January 22, Modi hosted a round-table dinner for 60 CEOs, including those from IBM, European Airbus, Japanese Hitachi, British BAE Systems and others. Today, Modi will meet with top officials from other ruthless transnationals such as General Motors, Royal Dutch Shell, Nestle, and JP Morgan.

Gokhale said, "The PM's message will be about India being an economy that can be the engine of global growth. We want others to participate in our growth and want to participate in others' growth as well."

According to the government spokesperson, Modi will also urge the "world" to adopt an even more brutal response to terrorism and cyber threats. The Modi government's "war on terror" is part of its campaign to isolate and justify increased military pressure on its arch-rival Pakistan, which has supported the separatist insurgency in India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir. The Modi

government has ratcheted up military tensions with Pakistan, giving the Indian military a free hand to engage in cross-border shelling across the Line of Control in disputed Kashmir. Since September 2016, both sides have killed scores of innocent civilians as well as large numbers of military personnel in cross-border barrages.

Under pressure from such agencies of international capital as the IMF and Moody's, the BJP has implemented a raft of pro-investor policies since coming to power in May 2014. These include: introduction of the GST (Goods and Services Tax), a regressive tax that disproportionately affects those with low incomes; deregulating the price of diesel and petrol; gutting long-standing labour laws; and weakening environmental regulations.

These policies have made the lives of India's poverty-stricken workers and toilers even more desperate. Estimates suggest that around 90 percent of all Indian workers are employed in the so-called informal sector, where apart from the largely unenforced minimum wage, there are effectively no labour standards or benefits. The Modi government, while enhancing the "ease-of-doing-business" and raising military spending, has slashed social spending directed to the poverty stricken, who number at least 800 million out of the country's 1.25 billion inhabitants.

The IMF and World Bank are demanding that Modi go even further in opening up the country to foreign capital. India's prime minister has made clear he is more than willing to do so, insisting repeatedly over recent months that New Delhi is focused on the "world" and that his government is committed to "reform to transform" the country.



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