

Modi government represses desperate migrant workers amid calamitous coronavirus lockdown

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2 April 2020

People across India and around the world have been shocked and outraged by the pictures of poor migrant workers caught up in the Indian government's ill-conceived and socially reckless 21-day nationwide coronavirus lockdown.

Without prior warning and, as soon became only too readily apparent, without any serious preparation, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on the evening of March 24 that starting at midnight the country's 1.37 billion people—with a few, unspecified exceptions—would be confined to their homes for the next three weeks.

Modi provided no explanation as to how people would procure food, and in India's villages and urban shanty towns, water, while they were under lockdown. Nor did he say how the more than 90 percent of India's workers who work, usually for no more than subsistence wages, in the unregulated “informal sector” would be able to procure food and other essentials if they went three weeks without work and without pay.

Only on March 26 did the government bother to announce a meagre relief package. Much of this consists of handouts of basic foodstuffs promised for weeks and even months hence, and tiny increases in the funds, or in the case of the National Rural Employment Guarantee wages, paid out by poverty alleviation programs. Underscoring the slapdash and fraudulent character of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's relief measures, the government arbitrarily included expenditures by state governments to which they have not committed, so as to inflate the headline money amount. Even so, the 1.7 lakh crore rupee (US \$22.5 billion) package amounts in per capita terms to little more 1,200 rupees or about US \$16.

Left to fend for themselves by a callous and criminally negligent government and ruling elite, poor working people have had to resort to desperate measures.

This is exemplified by the plight of India's migrant workers, who toil in construction, garment manufacture, as

day labourers and domestics, and whom Modi's lockdown has cast adrift.

Without work, money, and in many cases shelter, because they slept at their place of work or because they can no longer afford their squalid makeshift dwellings, millions of migrant workers, sometimes with children in tow, have fled Delhi, and the urban centres of Maharashtra, and Gujarat to return to their native villages. And, since all rail and bus transport has been suspended, they are walking home—in some cases barefoot.

Tragically, in so doing, they risk bringing the coronavirus pandemic from India's urban centres to its villages, where the majority of the population still lives and where even rudimentary health facilities are nonexistent.

Having created this nightmare, India's far-right Hindu supremacist government and state apparatus have responded in their typically brutal and brutish fashion.

Fearing social unrest, as the movement of the migrant workers swelled into the largest migration since the 1947 communal Partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, several state governments, including Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, announced they would organize for buses to ferry the workers home to their villages. But this measure was hastily organized, leading to chaotic scenes in which thousands, and in some cases tens of thousands, congregated en masse to scramble for bus seats—making further mockery of the Modi government's claim that its impromptu lockdown was the key to imposing the “social distancing” needed to break the chain of coronavirus infection.

Following this debacle, the central government's Home Ministry issued a directive Sunday that the migration must be stopped, with those already en route blocked from crossing state borders.

This soon led to clashes between workers and the police at several places. In one such incident, about 500 garment workers in Surat, Gujarat clashed with police, when the latter fired tear gas at them to prevent them embarking on

the journey to their native villages.

Workers who have travelled in some cases hundreds of kilometres—in order, as they have repeatedly told the press in anguished tones, to escape hunger and starvation—have been met with hostility from authorities.

Particularly horrific was the treatment meted out to a group of migrant workers when they arrived in Bareilly, a city of more than a million about 250 kilometres east of Delhi. As documented in a video that has gone viral, municipal workers and firemen clad in protective gear forced the migrants, some with their luggage tied to their backs, to squat. They then sprayed them with a sodium hypochlorite solution that is commonly used as a bleaching agent and that Bareilly uses as a disinfectant in cleaning its buses. The city administration, which ordered the action, has continued to defend it as a necessary preventive measure. However, Dr. Rajan Naringrekar, an insecticide officer for the Mumbai city government, exposed their fatuous claims that the disinfectant is benign. "It can cause itching or burning and is not approved to be used on humans," he told the *Indian Express*.

The Modi government's response to the coronavirus is in keeping with its role as an enforcer for Indian big business, utterly indifferent and hostile to the interests and aspirations of India's workers and toilers. During its nearly six years in office, it has presided over brutal austerity, while promoting privatization, deregulation, and the spread of contract labour, and integrating India ever more deeply into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

Until its sudden announcement of a nationwide lockdown at midnight March 24, the BJP government's efforts to contain the pandemic focused almost entirely on bans on foreign travellers. Despite a mounting outcry from medical specialists, it refused to organize systematic testing, and even now in the midst of a nationwide lockdown is stubbornly refusing to follow the World Health Organization's injunction to all governments to prioritize mass testing and contact tracking. Yesterday, Dr. R. Gangakhedkar of the Indian Council of Medical Research said that to date India has conducted COVID-19 tests on a grand total of 47,951 people.

Although the number of confirmed cases has surged in recent days, with 370 new cases and three deaths yesterday, Indian authorities continue to publicly claim there is no "community transmission." However, in arguing before the Supreme Court this week to uphold its efforts to block the movement of migrant workers, a government spokesman claimed that it is possible that three in every ten migrant workers are infected!

Given India's dense population, mass poverty, and dilapidated urban and virtually nonexistent rural health

infrastructure, the coronavirus is unquestionably a terrible menace. But the actions of the Modi government, including its calamitous lockdown, have multiplied the threat many times over.

Undoubtedly, an important factor in the Modi government's swing from cavalierly claiming India was an exemplar to the region and the world in fighting the virus to imposing the 21-day lockdown was the calculation that it could serve its communalist, authoritarian political agenda. In the months preceding the lockdown, the Modi government had been shaken by mass opposition to its anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act and growing working-class resistance to austerity and poverty wages.

Significantly, yesterday the government approached the Supreme Court to ask it to sanction the censoring of reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report published by the Committee to Protect Journalists, it has petitioned the court to issue a "directive to news outlets to refrain from publishing any COVID-19-related news without clearance from the government."

The health and socioeconomic crisis now stalking India is not due just to the failure of the Modi government and the BJP, but of Indian capitalism and all its political representatives.

For decades, successive governments at both central and state levels have maintained health spending at little more than one percent of GDP. Thanks to the pro-investor policies pursued by all sections of the political establishment, from the BJP and the Congress Party to the Stalinist CPM and CPI, hundreds of millions of people—the rural toilers and much of the working class—have effectively no access to health care in normal times, let alone during a pandemic. Hundreds of millions of others, all but the most privileged sections of the middle class, the rich and India's newly minted class of 120-plus billionaires, make great financial sacrifices, including incurring massive debts, to purchase care from a patchwork private health care system, with the private sector accounting for 82 percent of all outpatient visits in India and 58 percent of inpatients.



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