

# Millions of internal migrant workers suffering under India's lockdown

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Internal migrant workers across India are confronting increasingly harsh conditions, including lack of food and starvation, and unhygienic, overcrowded accommodation, as a result of the government's coronavirus lockdown.

Prime Minister Modi's 21-day lockdown was announced on March 24 without any prior warning or any substantial plan to provide the basic needs of working people and the rural toilers. This has brought immense hardship to millions of workers who are employed as daily low-wage workers in the textile, leather, retail, tourism, construction and other sectors.

When their workplaces closed, these workers had no money to buy food or pay rent and wanted to return to their home villages.

Last Tuesday, the government's callous attitude toward these workers was displayed when police in Mumbai violently attacked protesting internal migrants.

A group of workers who have been trapped in Mumbai without their wages gathered to demand transport facilities to get back to their villages hundreds of kilometres away. They were attacked by the police who arrested 11 people, including a television journalist.

The incident is part of the growing wave of protests, walkouts and strikes by workers around the world against the appalling conditions they face amid the pandemic. While the financial elites are using the crisis to enrich themselves, as indicated by rising stock market values, the masses are trapped in ever-worsening and life-threatening social conditions.

With all public transport halted, up to 600,000 migrant workers were confronted with having to walk hundreds of kilometres to reach their villages. Those who failed to do so were herded into temporary shelters arranged by state governments. The shelters are

unhygienic and without adequate amenities, including food and water. In most cases, the only meals are provided by charities and NGOs rather than state government authorities.

The rising anger of daily wage earners exploded on April 14 when Modi announced that the lockdown would be extended until May 3.

At around 4 p.m., a few hours after Modi's announcement, jobless migrant workers in Mumbai, including many from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, gathered at a railway station in Mumbai demanding transport back to their villages. Their numbers quickly swelled to around 1,500.

West Bengal worker Asadullah Sheikh told the *Week* magazine: "We have already spent our savings during the first phase of the lockdown. We have nothing to eat now."

Police responded by declaring the protest an unlawful assembly and accusing the participants of rioting and disobedience. Later that night, they arrested Vinay Dubey and several others. Dubey posted a video on a Facebook page in which he declared: "We are stuck at home. We are dying. So we might as well die fighting."

The posting has gone viral. The *Hindu* reported on April 15, a day after the protest, that the posting was liked by 16,000 people and shared by 15,000.

Television journalist Rahul Kukarni was among those arrested. Police claim that he had reported that train services would be resuming. This "outside agitation" allegedly prompted the protest.

According to the *Scroll.in* web site, Kulkarni had reported an internal note by South Central Railway authorities that suggested a decision to run special trains for stranded people.

The police attack on the demonstration is a desperate

attempt to divert political attention from the government's failure to provide any real assistance to these low-paid workers.

The Mumbai protest was not unique to that city. That night in Surat, in the neighbouring state of Gujarat, hundreds of migrant workers held a sit-down protest on a road in the Varachha area on Tuesday evening demanding to be sent home.

Surat is a busy seaport and a commercial and economic centre. Eighty migrant workers were arrested four days earlier, on April 10, for staging a protest and demanding they be sent back to their home villages.

Migrant workers' demonstrations have been held in other states, including Haryana, New Delhi, Telangana and Kerala. Participants voiced their anger to the *News.18* site last Wednesday.

*News.18* reported that most of the workers were attempting to survive on just one meal per day and were entirely dependent on donations from charities. It cited a comment from Manohar Kumar, a construction worker stuck in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad, who said he was living on "rice and starch, which was doubling up both as dinner and lunch."

Kumar added: "Some of my co-workers are planning to go to the nearest police station and demand transport to return home." He explained that he was so desperate to escape the appalling conditions created by the lockdown that he had even considered walking the 350 kilometres to his home.

There are currently over one million people unable to return to their home cities and villages, trapped in so-called relief camp accommodation. Government authorities are currently running over 22,500 of these camps, accommodating about 630,000 people. The remaining 400,000 people are in 3,909 NGO-run facilities.

These facilities are dangerously cramped and unhygienic. While the World Health Organisation and other medical experts insist that social distancing must be practised, this is impossible for those stranded in these camps.

According to a recent survey by Jan Sahas, an NGO, 90 percent of migrant workers have lost their only source of income since the lockdown began and four out of 10 lack enough resources for one day's rations. The extension of lockdown until May 3 will worsen the situation they face.

The Indian ruling elites, like their capitalist counterparts around the world, refuse to provide the most minimal requirements to sustain the lives of millions of the poorest and most exploited sections of the working class.



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