"The central and state governments, as well as the opposition parties, don't really care for human lives"

Tamil Nadu auto workers denounce Indian government responses to COVID-19

Sasi Kumar, Moses Rajkumar
1 May 2020

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke to laid off workers from auto plants located in the Sriperumbudur and Oragadam industrial hub near Chennai, the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The workers, who have returned to their home villages, outlined the escalating poverty and dangerous conditions created by COVID-19 and the grossly inadequate response to the pandemic by the central and state governments. They spoke by phone to the WSWS.

The right-wing national government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a three-week coronavirus lockdown on March 24. On April 14, the lockdown, or curfew as it is called in India, was extended until May 3, but without any serious plan to provide for the basic needs of the masses. Hundreds of millions of workers, particularly those working in the so-called informal sector, have been left without any income to purchase food and other basic items.

Sridhar, a Renault Nissan worker, is currently back in Kavalampedu village in Myladudurai district. He denounced Modi's central government, along with that of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami.

"The coronavirus infection is rapidly increasing on a daily basis, but I see no effective action being taken by any government to contain it. Here in my village, people have not been provided with protective face masks and medical facilities and none of the political parties have visited us to see the conditions facing the people here. The Tamil Nadu government announced that food would be provided to the people but so far no one has come here to give us any food items.

"I saw people on television rushing to buy essential food items in Koyambedu market [in Chennai] in the limited time possible during the curfew. The market was crowded and no one was observing social-distancing. The authorities have not made any of the necessary arrangements to protect people from the virus, and as a result, it was reported that a woman was infected while visiting the market.

"I only have contempt for the central and state governments and their failure to create a safe environment. [Tamil Nadu Chief Minister] Edappadi even claimed that the virus wouldn't affect poor people, but only the rich. What we see, however, is that the virus is infecting people around the world.

"We have to take care of our health and life but I don't trust the government. Modi said every person should take care of the poor in their neighbourhoods, but all these people are facing the same conditions.

"I don't believe in the 'democracy' of these rulers—it's bogus. Workers are losing their jobs across India and everyday ordinary people are facing hunger. In some areas poor working people have died of starvation and yet the government took no action."

Bala, 44, is a Motherson auto spare parts worker who was recently victimised by management over his role in a more than four-month long strike at the plant. He said: "There's no work for me in my village of Kaveripakkam in Myladudurai. Everyone in the village is facing starvation. The only help we got from the government was just 1,000 rupees [$US13.25] for a month, and some essential items distributed through

© World Socialist Web Site

ration shops."

Sam, a Youngshin Automotive employee from Nagapattinam town, said: "My father works in a wedding hall and is paid 10,000 rupees a month. The whole family is now sustained by my father's income because I was only paid a month's salary by my company, and I don't know if they will pay me for the shutdown period."

Sam denounced the Indian and Tamil Nadu governments. "The Modi government says people should stay at home during curfew but most of working people are daily labourers. The state government has only provided 1,000 rupees and some ration items since the curfew was announced on March 24. This is not sufficient. Several families in the villages are hungry and go to bed with empty stomachs. Most working people live in small huts and can't stay safe in these conditions."

Pandian, a worker at Glass Tech, said: "I'm now at Kallathu, my village in Jayangkondam. I was only paid one month's salary by my company, which did not even give us face masks when we were working before the shutdown. I had to travel home in an overcrowded bus.

"I've returned to my village but the local authorities here haven't bothered to provide people with masks and there's no basic medical infrastructure. I'm currently staying with my parents, who are weavers and used to earn 300 rupees on a daily basis. Their work, however, has stopped since the lockdown began, so we have no income.

"Previously, when I came to the village on leave, I could do agricultural work at a government-sponsored rural employment scheme. I was paid between 170 and 200 rupees per day, but now that work has stopped.

"Our entire family is facing an economic crisis. Vegetable prices are all increasing and supplies are running out too. We also experience police harassment and attacks whenever we go out to buy essential items for our daily needs."

Raja, 24, a Thai Summit Autoparts plant worker, said: "There's no work for me in my village of Thiruvannamalai. My father is a small farmer but there's been no rain water for irrigation and so we haven't been able to cultivate any crops. We have a cow at home and can earn around 3,000 rupees a month selling its milk. We now have to run the entire family on this small income."

Raja explained that his brother worked in Chennai but the company was shut down during the lockdown and so he returned to the village.

"When we were in Chennai we shared a rented room and were able to send our parents extra money. Imposition of the curfew, which has continued for over a month, has meant that everyone in the village is confronted with much worse economic conditions. If anyone gets infected by the virus they have to go to a government hospital in Thiruvannamalai, but it lacks basic facilities, including enough beds."

The Tamil Nadu state government, he continued, "boasted that it has acted very quickly on coronavirus, but the daily cases of infections are increasing. Modi has allocated very little money to fight the coronavirus. The central and state governments, as well as opposition parties, don't really care for human lives. I oppose all these politicians.

"The majority of villagers face food and water shortages. In some places, the people don't even have water facilities, let alone soap. Governments tell people to keep their hands clean and wash with soap. This is very cynical.

"State or parliamentary legislators never come to the villages or address peoples' problems during difficult times. They only visit during elections. I hate these politicians."

Arul, a Yamaha India worker from Thuraiyur village, said: "My father is a construction worker and used to earn 500 rupees a day. For the past five months, however, he has been without a job and so my parents depended on my income, but now I'm also without work. The company only paid me one month's salary."

Arul said he was worried because some people were still doing agricultural work, despite the risk of virus infection, because they had no food. "They say they have no choice but they are also aware that it could lead to their death," he said.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site