

Indian migrant workers in Chennai speak to WSWS about coronavirus pandemic

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World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with migrant workers and homeless people in Chennai about the worsening social conditions they now confront because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Tens of thousands of workers from various Indian states, including Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand, are living in Chennai, the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. These low-paid migrant workers are employed in construction and global production plants located in nearby industrial hubs, such as Sriperumbudur and Oragadam.

When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi suddenly imposed his ill-prepared national coronavirus lockdown on March 24, some workers were able to return to their home villages. Many, however, were unable to leave because of transport shutdowns and remain trapped in dangerously overcrowded accommodation in parts of Chennai.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers in Ayanavaram and the Rajiv Gandhi Nagar slum in Perambur where there are about 500 overcrowded and small huts.

According to a survey by Jan Sahas, a non-governmental organisation, over 90 percent of migrant workers in India are not “registered.” This means they do not have a Building and Other Construction Workers’ Welfare Board (BOCW) card and cannot access meagre welfare benefits, such as medical cover, pensions and housing loans. Some workers do not even have ration cards allowing them to purchase essential food items at subsidised rates.

Ranganathan, 34, is a day-hire construction worker from the Thiruvannamalai district in Tamil Nadu. He spoke to WSWS reporters near the Pananthope railway colony, a housing estate for railway workers, while he was waiting to be hired by a contractor.

“I earn 100 rupees (\$US1.3) as a daily worker. There’s no work for me in our village because there’s been no rain, and so our whole family—seven people—migrated to Chennai looking for jobs. All of us work in the construction sector but we don’t get regular employment.

“Since the imposition of the [coronavirus] curfew, we’ve not worked at all but we have to pay monthly rent of 5,000 rupees. We’ve had to pawn our jewellery to meet our immediate expenses, including food.

“The government said there would be some relaxation of curfew rules in the construction and painting sectors from April 20. We come here every day as usual, but no contractors have come to hire us.”

Sankar, 53, holds a BOCW card but has not received the promised 1,000 rupees from the government’s COVID-19 relief fund. He was critical of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), a union federation run by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist).

“The CITU doesn’t stand for workers’ interests. It did not even fight to get us the 1,000 rupee welfare money which construction workers are eligible for during the [national lockdown] unemployment period,” he said.

The COVID-19 relief fund allocated by the Modi government for the people is just a pittance. Tamil Nadu’s ruling AIADMK [All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam] state government functions as a puppet of [Modi’s] Bharathiya Janatha Party government.”

Sairaj, 25, a construction labourer who has also not worked since the lockdown, explained that he had been struggling to survive even before the pandemic.

“I came from Andhra Pradesh. I was earning 500 rupees per day but have to pay 4,000 rupees per month for rent and there’s no toilet facility. The

accommodation is very small for four family members. Here in the Rajiv Gandhi Nagar slum area, some houses with five people are rented for 2,000 rupees per month. None of the city corporation officers visit this area and we don't even have face masks to protect us from the virus."

Parthasarathy, 50, also from Andhra Pradesh, said: "Most of the workers living in this slum are from Andhra Pradesh. My parents depend on my salary but virtually all my salary is spent on food and rent. This slum area belongs to the government but local politicians, most of them from the opposition DMK [Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam] party, occupied this area and built small houses to make money from poor people."

Savithri, 42, a widow, explained that there was no work in her home village of Seiyaru and so her family migrated to Chennai. "I see that all the parties are corrupted, not just in my village, but in Chennai too. Politicians from different parties only visit our slum at election time to try and get our votes." She had no face mask and said she could not afford to buy one.

WSWS reporters also spoke with some homeless daily wage workers who have been sleeping on the floor of the Ayanavaram bus terminus. Of the 15 families at the bus terminus, only 10 have ration cards allowing them a pittance of financial support from the government. They have to pay to use nearby city-corporation owned toilets and bathrooms.

The miserable living conditions of these homeless families have been further compounded by the pandemic. They cannot afford basic protective equipment like face masks, and frequent hand washing, as "advised" by the government, is out of question because they cannot buy soap or sanitisers.

Selvam, a construction worker living at the Ayanavaram bus terminus, said: "I haven't had any work since the curfew was declared, more than 20 days ago. We've received no help whatsoever from any political parties or the government. None of us living here have been given a coronavirus medical test or provided with face masks for safety..."

"All of us are staying in an open-air bus terminus—elderly people and women and children—but for more than 20 days the government has taken no action regarding our health and wellbeing. We're scared about the impact of the coronavirus. We only

cook rice at night before we sleep and cook and sleep in the same open place. We eagerly wait each day for someone to give us food. Now and then some NGOs provide us with food.

Lalitha, 30, said: "I have a child but no husband and so I live alone with my child. We used to be able to pay and use the city corporation's bathroom and toilet but now we are not allowed to use them. We don't have any money to buy food and we are starving."

The Indian government and its state counterparts are utterly indifferent to the plight of these poverty-stricken workers and their families, whose dangerous social conditions are common place for the tens of millions of day-hire workers and homeless toilers across the country.



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