

Modi eases lockdown restrictions even as COVID-19 cases surge across India

Wasantha Rupasinghe**8 May 2020**

Egged on by big business, India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is pressing to "reopen" the economy so that sweatshop exploitation of the working class can resume at full throttle, even as the number of COVID-19 cases is surging.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced May 1 that India's 40-day lockdown, which was set to end May 3, would be extended a further two weeks till May 17. However, he also vowed that there would be a further "easing of restrictions" across much of the country, so as to allow the resumption of much of commerce and industry. Modi justified his promised "gradual easing" by cynically invoking the plight of India's workers and toilers—tens of millions of whom have lost their jobs and all income—and by touting the claim that the lockdown has proven largely successful in checking the spread of the virus.

In reality, the situation remains perilous. COVID-19 cases and deaths are surging overall, and there are a number of major local outbreaks, including in the slums of Mumbai, any of which could rapidly lead to a catastrophic loss of life, due to the comprised health of India's malnourished poor, the country's densely populated slums, and its ramshackle public health system.

Between May 1 and 6, confirmed COVID-19 cases rose by more than 15,000, from 37,257 to 52,987, while deaths jumped from 1,223 to 1,785 an increase of 45 percent.

These figures, it need be emphasized, gravely underestimate the true spread of the highly contagious virus, since India from the beginning of the pandemic has severely rationed COVID-19 tests. In a country of 1.37 billion people, India has conducted little more than 1 million tests. In per capita terms, India, according to statista.com, had performed as of yesterday, just 984

tests per million inhabitants, only a tiny fraction of the per capita tests administered by all other countries with more than 50,000 confirmed coronavirus cases. On a per capita basis, Turkey has performed 14 times more tests than India, the US more than 24 times and Germany 32 times.

The government's push to reopen the economy, coupled with its failure to mobilize society's resources, beginning with the assets of the tiny strata of rich and super-rich who monopolize India's wealth, to provide essentials to working people during the lockdown and strengthen the country's health system, all but ensure that the current upswing in COVID-19 infections and deaths will tragically prove to be only the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Under the new phase in India's lockdown, travel by air, rail, bus, and urban subway systems, and between states is to resume. Educational institutions are to remain closed.

As part of its preparations to "reopen" the economy, the government has divided the country's 733 districts into three zones, depending on their supposed exposure to the virus.

130 districts have been labelled "hotspots" or part of the "Red Zone," because they have high rates of COVID-19 infections.

The Orange Zone is currently comprised of 284 districts where the government claims "no cases have been detected for a fortnight." However, the accuracy of such claims is in serious doubt, given the low-level of testing.

319 districts with "no fresh COVID-19 cases for 21 days" comprise the "Green Zone."

The movement of taxis and rickshaws at 50 percent capacity is to be allowed in the orange and green zones, but prohibited in red zone districts

However, even in the so-called red zone, much of industry, especially important exporters, are already allowed to operate. Those exempt from the lockdown include companies in Special Economic Zones, industrial estates/townships, IT hardware manufacturers, the jute industry, and manufacturers of packaging materials.

Government propaganda claims that only employers that follow strict social distancing and other “safety guidelines” will be allowed to operate. But India’s employers, with the full complicity of the central and states government, are notorious for their wanton disregard for occupational health and safety regulations.

Underscoring how the corporate elite prioritizes profits over workers’ lives, India records a high number of industrial accidents and workplace fatalities in “normal times.” According to a study by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), around 48,000 people die at work in India every year.

Yesterday, eleven people were killed and 350 hospitalized as the result of a chemical-plant gas leak in Visakhapatnam, an industrial center in Andhra Pradesh. The plant was in the process of resuming production after the lockdown.

On Sunday, Modi congratulated and saluted frontline healthcare workers, who he dubbed the “corona-warriors”. While hundreds of doctors and other medical personnel have gotten sick as a result of the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and hospitals are crippled by the lack of equipment and personnel, Modi sent Indian Air Force combat jets and transport aircraft over various state capitals to drop flower petals on hospitals treating COVID-19 patients.

The government’s attitude to the country’s workers and toilers is exemplified by its callous treatment of tens of millions of migrant workers and other day-labourers who have been provided, at most, with starvation-ration relief during the lockdown.

Before being herded into crowded, makeshift internal refugee camps by the police, millions of migrant workers, rendered jobless and often homeless by the government’s ill-prepared and sudden March 24 lockdown announcement, attempted to return to their native villages on foot walking hundreds of kilometers.

On April 2, police found fourteen migrant laborers travelling over 1,200 km from Nashik to Lucknow in

the belly of a cement-mixer truck. A shocking video that quickly went viral showed several workers emerging from inside the mixer, clutching bags and small bundles of their belongings to their chests, after police stopped the vehicle on suspicion.

Less than two weeks into lockdown, the Right to Food Campaign reported that at least 270 people had already died due to hunger, exhaustion, state violence, suicide prompted by the loss of all income, and inability to access healthcare.

Millions of migrant workers are now stuck in crowded camps, hundreds of kilometers away from their homes, without money or resources to purchase the most basic of necessities.

The filthy and cramped camps resemble India’s notorious jails, with security officials harassing the migrant workers, while state authorities largely leave it to NGOs and other charities to provide them with food.

Facing increasingly vocal opposition from the migrant workers, the BJP government announced on May 1 that trains would be arranged to send the workers home. However, it soon emerged that the workers will have to pay their own fare, which for many is an impossibility. The state government in Kerala, which is led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), has, for example, asked poor workers to pay the base fare of 875 rupees for being ferried to Jharkhand, *India Today* reported.

Going home will not end their misery. A report published last week by volunteer group Stranded Workers Action Network (Swan) based on distress calls from 16,863 migrant workers, said that 64 percent had less than 100 rupees (about US \$1.30). 99 percent of those who were self-employed said they had no earnings during the lockdown period, while 78 percent of those who worked for wages had not received any pay.



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