

The brutal face of India's ruling class

Sixteen migrant workers killed by goods train

Wasantha Rupasinghe
14 May 2020

More human victims were added last week to the growing toll of people killed as a result of the Indian government's callous response to the coronavirus. On May 8, 16 migrant workers were run over and killed by a goods train on railway tracks near Aurangabad in Maharashtra. Five other workers were critically injured in the incident.

The 16 workers, aged between 20 and 35, were attempting to return to their home state of Madhya Pradesh. They previously worked at a steel plant in Jalna district, Maharashtra, which stopped production after the Indian government announced its COVID-19 lockdown on March 24.

They were among the tens of thousands of internal migrant workers who could not return home and were put into jail-like shelters during the lockdown.

The steel workers had been in this accommodation for 45 days when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced "Shramik Special Trains," i.e., limited train services to transport these workers back to their home towns and villages.

The state government, however, did not provide any transport to the departure point for the Shramik Special Trains, about 157 kilometres away in Bhusawal. So the workers decided to walk.

The workers began walking along the railway track to avoid police detection and assumed that trains would not be running because of the lockdown. They covered about 40 kilometres, walking throughout the night, then fell asleep exhausted on the railway line—17 on the tracks and 3 others nearby. They were run over by a goods train at about 5.30 a.m. Fourteen were killed on the spot and two others later succumbed to their injuries.

A chilling report in the May 8 edition of *Times of India* said: "The scene at the tragedy's spot was gory

[with] the blood stained rotis [bread], some torn currency notes, clothes and the victims' other belongings, strewn around. On reaching the spot, police and railway administration found it difficult to gather workers' limbs that too were strewn around, shifted the workers' remains to the government medical college and hospital (GMCH) at Aurangabad for post mortem."

A statement from the railways said the driver of the goods train, after seeing the workers on the track, honked several times but was unable to stop the locomotive and hit the workers.

In an attempt to deflect mass outrage over the deaths, the chief ministers of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh states both announced 500,000 rupees (\$US6,680) compensation to each of the kin of the deceased and said there would be an "independent inquiry."

Like numerous other investigations, this inquiry will not indict those responsible for this tragedy—the respective state and central governments and the capitalist class that they serve.

Just as he has done in the past, Prime Minister Modi used his Twitter account to shed crocodile tears, declaring that he was "extremely anguished by the loss of lives due to the rail accident" and that "all assistance required is being provided." However, he provided no details about this "assistance" or who would receive it.

Millions of angry migrant workers impacted by Modi's ill-prepared lockdown will treat with contempt his claim to be "anguished" over this tragedy.

According to a 2017–18 Labour Force Survey, over 70 percent of workers in the non-agriculture sector—most of them migrant workers—did not have written job contracts or receive regular salaries. About 55 percent were not eligible for paid leave and 50 percent did not have any social security benefits. This is just one index of how the Indian government and the entire ruling

class treat this section of the working class.

The ill-prepared national lockdown imposed by Modi's government, and the corrupt financial oligarchy that it represents, has had a devastating financial impact on the migrant workforce.

India's ruling elite treats these workers as little more than slaves or bonded labourers to be ruthlessly exploited. Karnataka's Bharatiya Janata Party Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa made this clear after meeting with Confederation of Real Estate Development Association of India (CREDAI) members on May 5. He declared that labourers should avoid "unnecessary travel" because construction and industrial activities would have to be "resumed."

The same day, the Karnataka government cancelled inter-state trains, provoking widespread anger from thousands of workers. Confronted with this mass opposition, the state government withdrew its train cancellation directive.

On May 8, the *Wire* published interviews with poverty-stricken migrant workers walking along Bengaluru's elevated highway in an attempt to reach their homes in Gorakhpur district, 2,000km away.

Bhajrangi Nishad, 30, said: "We have no money and have had no rations given to us for two days. Our contractor threatened to evict us if we did not resume work... [but] who knows when this lockdown will end. We know what is happening in Mumbai and we do not want to end up being trapped in a city where no one cares whether we die of this *bimari* [disease] or hunger."

Nishad explained that he and other workers had waited for days outside the police station in order to register a request to travel when the trains began running again as promised by the government. "All we got was the *danda* [baton]. I've more faith that I can walk home than get a train ticket," he said.

The *Wire* reported that that between May 3 and 5, over 213,000 migrant workers registered their intention to travel by train on the state government's online portal. Only 9,600 people were actually able to board trains, however, because of massive queues at the police station.

Every day brings new media reports about the plight of these abandoned migrant workers. A day after the tragic death of the 16 migrant workers on the Maharashtra rail tracks, the media reported that five

workers were killed when a truck overturned near Patha village Madhya Pradesh. Thirteen workers were injured in the incident.

On the same day, *First Post* reported that three migrant workers walking from Maharashtra to Uttar Pradesh had died in the Bawani district of the state of Madhya Pradesh. According to doctors, the workers appeared to have died from dehydration and fatigue due to scorching heat.

A recent study by DataMeet, a community data research platform, reported that 74 migrants attempting to return home during the COVID-19 lockdown have been killed in road and train accidents and 26 have died from exhaustion while walking or cycling.

These tragic stories are just the tip of a massive humanitarian disaster to which Modi government and Indian financial oligarchy are callously indifferent.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact