

Modi promotes “herd immunity,” vows “quantum jump” in pro-investor reforms

Wasantha Rupasinghe and Keith Jones
18 May 2020

India’s far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is dramatically intensifying the bourgeoisie’s class war assault on the working class.

In the name of reviving the economy after an ill-conceived anti-COVID 19 lockdown, the BJP government is now seeking to force a return-to-work even as the pandemic rages.

In a nationwide speech last Tuesday that was supposed to outline the government’s plans to stimulate the economy, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an effective policy of “herd immunity,” in which the authorities abandon any concerted attempt to stop the spread of COVID-19. Instead, the highly contagious and potentially lethal virus is to be allowed to run rampant, at the cost of countless lives, until so many people have contracted it that it expends itself.

“COVID-19,” said Modi, “will be a part of our lives for a very long time. But we can’t let our lives remain confined around COVID-19.” He then vowed that the “fourth-stage” of the lockdown, set to begin today, will be very different from the three previous stages—with “a new form and with new rules.”

India’s lockdown, which was initiated on March 25 with less than four hours’ forewarning, was meant to end after 21 days, but is now nearing the end of its eighth week.

Its impact has been calamitous, because the government refused to provide anything more than token support to the hundreds of millions of workers and toilers the lockdown has deprived of any income.

At the same time, the lockdown has failed to halt COVID-19’s spread, because the government failed to marshal India’s resources to conduct mass testing and contract-tracing, and to dramatically strengthen and expand the country’s ramshackle health system.

In his Tuesday address, Modi cynically invoked the suffering of India’s workers and toilers to justify his government’s campaign to reopen the economy. In reality, Modi is acting at the urging of big business which is desperate to resume extracting profit through the sweatshop exploitation of India’s workers and toilers.

“Herd immunity”—in which the lives of workers and their families are to be sacrificed so as to swell the profits of India’s business houses and investors—is the cutting edge of a class-war assault of historic dimensions that Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP are mounting at the urging of the ruling elite.

In his May 12 address, Modi vowed a “quantum jump” in pro-investor “reforms,” and identified changes to land and labour laws as a top priority for his government. Indian and foreign capital have long been demanding that India’s labour laws be gutted to make it easier for large industrial operations to lay off workers and close facilities, and that the government remove obstacles to the amassing of large blocks of land for business projects.

Even prior to Modi’s speech, various BJP state governments acting at the urging of Modi’s administration had announced the “suspension” of numerous labour regulations to greenlight 72-hour workweeks, including in some states without any overtime pay, as well as other anti-worker outrages.

At a series of daily press conferences, beginning Wednesday and concluding yesterday, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman provided further details about the government’s economic “recovery plan.”

Sitharaman announced an impending fire-sale of government assets. She said that the private sector would henceforth be barred from no sectors of the economy, and that public sector enterprises or PSUs

will be restricted to “strategic” sectors of the economy.

She and other BJP government officials also made it clear that in response to the acceleration of the capitalist crisis triggered by the pandemic, including a surge in great-power conflict, India intends to deepen its anti-China military-strategic alliance with US imperialism. This includes New Delhi working with the Trump administration to attract US companies Washington is pressuring to leave China to relocate to India and making India even more attractive as a production site for US arms manufacturers.

With great fanfare Modi had declared last Tuesday that his government has committed 20 trillion rupees (US \$266 billion)—the equivalent of 10 percent of India’s GDP—to stimulating the economy.

Much of this is smoke and mirrors, involving money recycled from previous government announcements. It also includes the huge sums the Reserve Bank of India, the country’s central bank, has provided to the banks and other financial institutions in the form of emergency support to prop up the financial markets and bail out India’s rich and super rich.

Sitharamanan did outline various schemes to bolster different sections of business. But for the masses there were only tiny sums for social welfare, with most of the new support to come in the form of loans and schemes involving private sector partnerships, as in the case of a new program to build housing for migrant workers.

The headline announcement from the BJP government as regards the estimated 90 million day labourers who have lost their jobs due to the lockdown—a large portion of whom have been unable to access any government support—is that it will spend 35 billion rupees (\$463 million), or the equivalent of about \$5 per worker, over the next two months to provide them with food assistance.

This can best be described as famine rations.

The lack of assistance for the day-labour and migrant workers underscores that the Modi government has a deliberate policy of making workers go hungry to impel them to return to work amid the pandemic. And this under conditions where India’s employers—who are already notorious for systematically violating, with government complicity, the country’s lax labour regulations—are being told by the ruling BJP that labour laws are an obstacle to investment and need to be gutted.

Meanwhile, authorities reported Sunday that India had 4,957 new COVID-19 cases, the largest single-day increase to date. During the past week, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases rose dramatically, from 62,939 cases on May 10 to 90,927 yesterday, an increase of almost 45 percent. During the same period, a further 763 deaths were attributed to COVID-19, bringing the official death tally to 2,872.

Alarming as these figures are, they undoubtedly underestimate the pandemic’s spread by many multiples, because India has failed to organize systematic mass testing. As of last Friday, India’s per capita testing ratio of 1.48 per thousand people was among the lowest in the world for any country with a major COVID-19 outbreak, and it was less than a twentieth of the woefully inadequate US testing rate.

Typifying the government’s indifference to the population, Indian health authorities continue to blithely insist that there is no evidence of “community transmission.” Given that India effectively suspended all international entries some seven weeks ago, this claim is absurd on its face.

Ominously, the coronavirus has become entrenched in the slums of India’s two largest urban agglomerations, Mumbai and Delhi, where the population is especially vulnerable due to poverty, inadequate access to clean water and cramped dwelling quarters.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact