

Indian government abandons lockdown measures as coronavirus infections soar

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government yesterday initiated phase one of their so-called “unlockdown,” under which all remaining closures and restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the highly contagious and potentially lethal virus are to be lifted. Even as COVID-19 infections soar across India, Modi’s Hindu-supremacist government is making clear that it is abandoning any concerted effort to fight the pandemic’s spread.

Yesterday, with confirmed COVID-19 cases reaching 190,535, India displaced France to become the country with the seventh highest number of novel coronavirus infections in the world. Just in the past week alone, India recorded more than 50,000 new cases. Monday saw yet another daily record for new cases, with 8,392 registered. India’s official COVID-19 death total now stands at 5,164, with more than 2,000 deaths reported in the past 12 days.

Under the “unlockdown,” the government is accelerating the process launched in late April of lifting the sweeping lockdown measures Modi imposed, with just a few hours’ notice, on March 25.

A Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) statement issued on the weekend announced the removal, as of Monday, of all central government restrictions on intra- and interstate travel and the reopening of places of worship, hotels, restaurants and shopping malls beginning June 8, outside specially designated containment areas. Under phase two of the “unlockdown” set for July, decisions on reopening schools and other educational institutions will be taken “after consultations with States and Union territories’ administrations.”

Metro (subway) systems, cinemas, gymnasiums, bars and meeting halls are to remain closed until the third phases of the “unlockdown.” International air travel also remains suspended.

In line with the central government’s reckless push to reopen the economy, even India’s worst-hit states—like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan—have announced their own “conditional easing” of restrictions.

Although Maharashtra’s Shiv Sena-led, Congress Party-supported government said it was extending the state’s lockdown until June 30, it announced a “phase-wise resumption” of activities under its own “Mission Begin Again” plan. Under this plan, even in “red zones”—that is, the areas of the state with the highest infection rates—offices can now open with 10 to 15 percent of their regular staffing levels. Intra-district bus travel will resume with 50 percent passenger capacity, and religious sites can open from June 8. All markets and shops, except malls, have been given the green light to reopen from June 5 on an “odd-even basis,” which means half of the shops in an area will be opened every alternate day, with the claim this will avoid crowding.

Already on April 20, the Modi government gave the go-ahead for the reopening of industrial worksites, even within COVID-19 “hotspot areas.” Although the authorities claimed businesses would have to operate in “strict compliance” with existing lockdown guidelines, this proved to be a sham. The government’s order for employers to arrange the transportation of workers to workplaces “in dedicated transport” and “ensuring social distancing” has been widely flouted by industrial bosses without any consequences. As for the government’s claim that factory owners would be “booked” if a worker tests positive for COVID-19, this predictably proved to be simply bluster.

Showing its indifference to the fate of the impoverished workers and toilers, India’s ruling elite is determined to accelerate the reopening of the economy even as the pandemic rages, so it can resume the process of extracting massive profits through the sweatshop exploitation of the working class.

Like his counterparts around the world, including US President Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Modi has embraced the ruinous “herd immunity” policy under which the disease is allowed to run rampant so profit-extraction can proceed unhindered.

Jayaprakash Muliyil, an outspoken proponent of herd immunity who advises the government as the head of the Scientific Advisory Committee of its National Institute of Epidemiology, blithely acknowledges this reckless policy will lead to a massive loss of life that will be counted in the millions. Last week, Muliyil told *Outlook*, “With a substantial opening up of the lockdown, India may see at least two millions deaths. ... Mortality is low, let the young go out and work.”

The government’s herd immunity policy is the cutting edge of an intensified class war assault on the working class, which aims to “revive” India’s economy by pushing through socially incendiary policies long demanded by domestic and international capital, but which successive governments have been unable to implement due to massive opposition from working people. Modi has vowed a “quantum jump” in pro-investor “reforms,” including the massive sell-off of government-owned enterprises, the gutting of labour laws, and the abolition of restrictions on the amassing of large tracts of land for agribusiness and industrial and commercial projects.

With enthusiastic support from India’s ruling elite, the Modi government is also doubling down on New Delhi’s reactionary anti-China military-strategic alliance with US imperialism. It has unreservedly welcomed the Trump administration’s call for India to serve as a cheap-labour platform for US arms manufacturers and an alternate production-chain hub for US transnationals that are curtailing

production in China due to increasing US-China trade and geostrategic tensions.

The premature push to “reopen” Indian’s economy has already led to a spate of new infections, including at Hyundai Motor Company’s plant in Chennai, Tamil Nadu; Muruti Suzuki’s Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant; and smartphone manufacturing facilities owned by Vivo and Oppo in Noida, on the outskirts of Delhi.

In their campaign to force working people to return to work under such dangerous conditions, the Modi government and Indian big business are exploiting the social misery they have created. As a result of the government’s calamitous, ill-prepared lockdown, at least 120 million people, the overwhelming majority of them day labourers, lost their jobs and income, and were provided at best famine-relief style rations. Millions of other workers have had their wages cuts or received no wages at all during the now 10-week lockdown.

The Modi government failed to use the lockdown to mount a systematic campaign of mass testing and contract tracing—which the World Health Organisation considers essential to any viable strategy to deal with COVID-19 in the absence of a vaccine—or to pour the requisite massive resources into strengthening India’s ramshackle health care system.

As a result, despite the massive sacrifices imposed on the population by the lockdown, it has manifestly failed to stop the spread of the virus as can be seen by its accelerating spread in both major urban centres and rural India.

Maharashtra has continuously been the worst-hit state with 67,655 cases and 2,286 deaths as of Monday. Almost half of all cases and one fourth of all deaths have been recorded in Mumbai, India’s second largest city.

Maharashtra is followed by Tamil Nadu with 22,333 cases and 173 deaths; Delhi, 19,844 cases and 473 deaths; Gujarat, 16,779 cases and 1,030 deaths; and Uttar Pradesh, 7,823 cases and 213 deaths.

According to the government, close to 10 million migrant workers whom it blocked from walking home to seek food and shelter in their home villages and instead herded into makeshift, prison-like internal refugee camps, have now made their way home.

However, the authorities’ failure to test and treat the migrant workers before they travelled to their home villages means that many have carried the virus into rural areas, where health care facilities are virtually non-existent. Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, which have received most of the returning migrants, have witnessed the “maximum increase in number of districts affected by COVID-19,” reported the *Hindustan Times* on May 18. As a result, new infections have been recorded in 180 additional districts over the past two weeks, taking the total of districts with infections nationwide to 550.

The health and socio-economic crises triggered by the pandemic are erupting in a society that was already at the breaking point prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Thirty years of economic “liberalisation” have produced poverty and misery for hundreds of millions of workers and toilers through privatisation, the gutting of public services and agricultural supports, and the imposition of poverty wages. Meanwhile, the wealth of India’s millionaires and billionaires has exploded.

Before being temporarily interrupted by the pandemic, mass protests rattled the Indian government between December 2019 and March. These included a one-day general strike in January, in which tens of millions participated, and mass demonstrations, uniting working people of all communal and caste backgrounds, against Modi’s anti-

Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The cruelty and indifference shown by the ruling elite towards the impoverished masses during the pandemic are providing further fuel to this opposition, ensuring an even more powerful eruption of mass working class anger in the days and weeks to come.

Modi’s BJP government is preparing to meet this opposition with violent repression and fascistic communal reaction. Modi spelled this out in a “letter to my fellow Indians” he penned to mark one year of his second term in office.

As proof of his boast that BJP rule has ushered in “a golden chapter in the history of Indian Democracy,” Modi gloated over a series of authoritarian, Hindu-supremacist measures. He claimed his government’s anti-democratic abrogation of the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, India’s lone Muslim-majority state, had “furthered the spirit of national unity and integration.” He also enthused over the Supreme Court’s ruling that sanctioned the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, by Hindu communalist thugs incited by BJP leaders in 1992, and its “order” that the BJP government oversee the building of a temple to the mythical Hindu god Lord Ram on the site. The Court’s ruling, declared Modi, had brought an “amicable end to a debate persisting for centuries.” And he hailed the CAA, which denies millions of Muslims citizenship rights and makes religion a criterion for determining citizenship for the first time in post-colonial India, as an “expression of India’s spirit of inclusiveness.”

No genuine opposition to the ultra-right-wing course being charted by the Modi government—herd immunity, intensified exploitation of the working class, deeper integration into US imperialism’s war drive against China, authoritarianism, and communal reaction—exists within the political establishment. On May 22, 22 political parties, including the Congress Party (till recently the ruling elite’s preferred party of government), the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and the fascistic Shiv Sena met to “exchange views on [the] extraordinary situation in the country arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic.” Expressing their willingness to support the government’s reactionary agenda against the working class, the joint statement issued by the parties urged the BJP government to “reach out and engage in a dialogue with all political parties.”



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