India emerges as a global epicenter of COVID-19 pandemic

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India is emerging as a global epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, with the virus spreading rapidly throughout the country, including to rural areas where public health facilities are largely nonexistent.

Home to the world's largest number of desperately poor people, the South Asian country now leads the world in terms of daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases, with new cases exceeding 60,000 on virtually every day for the past two-and-a-half weeks.

India is on pace to soon surpass Brazil as the country with the world's second largest total tally of COVID-19 infections.

Since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party government began "reopening the economy" at the end of April, the country's COVID-19 caseload has gone up exponentially, with cases increasing more than a hundredfold.

On May 1, India had just over 25,000 cases and 1,150 deaths. As of Tuesday, according to extremely conservative official figures, total infections rose to 3,170,942 with 58,570 fatalities. A record number of daily infections was registered on Saturday, with 70,488 cases. Underscoring that the spread of the virus continues to accelerate, the past seven days have witnessed the fastest weekly increase in new infections and fatalities since the start of the pandemic, with nearly half a million new infections and 6,666 people losing their lives. The latest one million infections have been registered in just 16 days.

Responsibility for this health and social disaster lies squarely with the entire Indian ruling class, which has pursued policies from the outset aimed at defending the wealth and business interests of the superrich, while leaving the vast majority of impoverished workers and toilers to fend for themselves.

The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party government led by Modi has refused to take any serious measures to strengthen the country's chronically underfunded health care system and has facilitated the rapid spread of the virus to almost every corner of the country with its homicidal back-to-work drive. It has been supported in this by all of the official opposition parties, which have used their positions in various state governments to throw open the economy so big business can begin extracting profits once again from highly-exploited workers, regardless of what this costs in human lives.

Despite the horrendous toll the coronavirus has taken, especially on the working class and rural poor, Modi continues to insist that his government has mounted an exemplary response. In his August 15 Independence Day speech, Modi said India is "doing well" in the battle against the deadly pandemic. He added that he "believe[s] the indomitable will power and determination of 130 crore [10 million] countrymen will make us win over Corona [pandemic], and we shall definitely win."

Modi's rhetoric is aimed at covering up the callous attitude of his BJP government towards the lives of millions of working people and rural toilers. After ignoring the threat posed by the pandemic for more than two months, the government belatedly implemented an ill-prepared countrywide lockdown on March 25 with only a few hours' notice. The lockdown failed to prevent the spread of the disease, above all, because the government did not use the time to increase desperately needed financial support to the health care system, nor put in place a system of mass testing and contact tracing to identify and contain infections.

Neither did the government provide adequate financial and other support to the tens of millions of workers who lost their incomes overnight, resulting in hunger and social distress on a vast scale. The social misery produced by the government's policies meant that millions of workers were left with no choice but to return to unsafe workplaces when lockdown measures began to be prematurely lifted from late April onwards.

The Congress Party, Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI), Aam Admi Party (AAP), Shiv Sena and several regional parties are equally to blame for the rapid spread of the pandemic. All of them, whether as part of current or past

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governments at the central or state levels, have intentionally neglected the public health care system by limiting budget allocations to the meagre level of 1.5 percent of India's GDP.

Since the onset of the pandemic, none of the state governments involving these parties has challenged the Modi government's criminal policy of "herd immunity," which involves allowing the virus to run rampant so that major companies can return to business as usual. It is worth noting in this regard that two of the states hit hardest by the virus, the western state of Maharashtra and the capital of Delhi, are run by a coalition government of the ultra-right Shiv Sena and Congress, and an AAP government respectively.

The "herd immunity" policy, which even its advocates acknowledge will likely lead to a death toll in the millions, is the spearhead of a savage assault being prepared by the Modi government against the working class. The prime minister has vowed to initiate a "quantum jump" in pro-investor reforms, including the further relaxation of India's already lax labour laws so as to slash labour costs and make India more attractive to global investors.

To downplay the disastrous consequences of its policies, which are becoming ever clearer with the daily increases in new infections and deaths, the Modi government primarily highlights the so-called "recovery rate," which is "nearly at 75 percent." It also claims to have presided over a "lower fatality rate" of 1.86 percent, which is "one of the lowest globally," according to the Union Health & Family Welfare Ministry.

These claims are absurd in many ways. Indian state authorities are notorious for vastly underreporting death rates, which has no doubt contributed to the comparatively low official fatality rate. Changes made to the procedure for releasing COVID-19 patients from hospitals have also artificially boosted the recovery rate. Whereas a patient initially required two negative coronavirus tests before being discharged, the government adopted new guidelines in April that allowed patients to be discharged if they showed no symptoms for three days. Even patients receiving critical care require just one negative test before being discharged. As a result, there have been repeated reports of patients who have died after leaving hospitals. It remains unclear whether these deaths are being logged as coronavirus casualties.

The attempt to paint a rosy picture of the low death rate also ignores the devastating impact COVID-19 is having on the elderly and other vulnerable sections of the population. According to a study by the US-based National Bureau of Economic Research, Indians over the age of 60 account for 53 percent of all virus deaths, even though they make up just nine percent of the general population.

The refusal of the Modi government and its counterparts at the state level to make available additional funds for India's desperately underresourced public health system has also created terrible conditions at many hospitals. There is an acute shortage of medical staff and personal protective equipment for frontline workers. Doctors, nurses and other medical staff have been forced to labour in hellish conditions and have often gone for months without pay. This has triggered a growing number of strikes and protests.

For example, on July 18, sanitation workers and nursing staff of the All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) in Patna went on strike to protest the nonpayment of their salaries for the previous two months. Although the facility was designated as a COVID-19 hospital by the state government, striking workers alleged it had become a "hub for VIP patients of COVID-19 like ruling government leaders, ministers, bureaucrats, judges and businessmen." As they have occupied the majority of the isolation rooms and ICU beds with ventilators, health care workers or their family members have been refused admission and treatment at the hospital where they have worked since the beginning of the pandemic, according to NewsClick.

Across India, around 200 doctors have already succumbed to the virus, 40 percent of whom were general practitioners.

These protests in the health care sector coincide with mounting social opposition among the working class and rural toilers to the pro-corporate agenda of Modi and the ruling elite as a whole. Millions of workers, including social health and child care workers, have participated in various strikes and protests over recent weeks against planned privatisations, cuts to public spending, and attacks on workplace rights.

The growing opposition to the Indian political establishment must find an independent political way forward if it is to put a stop to the ruling class onslaught on working people and save lives amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic. This requires the mobilisation of the working class and rural toilers in a struggle for a workers and peasants government pledged to socialist policies.

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