

At corporate India's behest, Modi government lets pandemic run rampant

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The COVID-19 pandemic is now spreading across India like wildfire, threatening a human catastrophe of biblical or, to be more precise, 21st century capitalist proportions.

Yesterday, Indian health authorities reported 259,170 new infections, only marginally lower than Saturday's record tally of 273,802. India's daily count of new COVID-19 cases has exceeded 200,000 every day since April 15. That is for six straight days.

Daily COVID-19 fatalities have been increasing by more than 1,000 a day since April 14—although numerous reports suggest that this is a gross undercount. Yesterday's daily COVID-19 death toll set a new record: 1,761 deaths were officially attributed to the virus, bringing the total to more than 182,000.

Despite the wave of infections and death, India's Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is adamant that it will not impose a nationwide lockdown to halt the spread of COVID-19, which is being fueled, as around the world, by new, more contagious and lethal variants.

On Monday, Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman spoke with the heads of major business lobby groups and the CEOs of some of the country's biggest corporations, including Maruti Suzuki and Tata Steel, to reassure them that the Union government will continue to prioritise corporate profits over human lives.

Sitharaman said that "there is no plan [for a] national lockdown." Animesh Saxena, the president of the Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises (FISME), told the *Economic Times of India* that the "Focus would be on creating small containment zones to stop the [virus's] spread. She wanted our inputs for addressing any of our concerns."

R.C. Bhargava, the head of Maruti Suzuki, India's largest automaker, voiced his satisfaction with the government's decision to let the virus run rampant. He told the Kolkata-based *Telegraph*, "Do not think lockdown is the appropriate response this time. [It] will do more harm than good."

In a national televised address last night, Prime Minister Modi delivered much the same message as his finance minister. Only far from wanting to "address" the concerns of the Indian people, he effectively told them to live with the threat of mass death and continue to fend for themselves in the face of an unprecedented socio-economic crisis.

Rewording the capitalist mantra that "the cure must not be worse than the disease," Modi declared that India must be "saved" not from the pandemic, but from a lockdown aimed at halting the virus's advance and saving lives! "In today's situation, we have to save the country from lockdown," Modi declared.

"I would also request the states," he continued, "to use lockdown as the last option. We have to try hard to avoid lockdown and the focus should be on the micro containment zones only."

Harrowing as the current situation is in India, everything suggests that the exponential growth in COVID-19 infections and deaths has only begun:

- * There are currently more than 2 million active COVID-19 cases, almost a four-fold increase from the 580,327 on April 1.

- * The virus is surging in multiple regions, from Maharashtra in the west, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh in the north, to Chhattisgarh in the centre-east, and Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in the south.

- * India's ramshackle public health system is collapsing under the weight of the surge in cases.

Hospitals are already overwhelmed by shortages of staff, intensive care beds, and anti-COVID-19 drugs, such as Remdesivir and Tocilizumab. Several states and the Delhi National Capital Territory, which has the country's highest per capita number of COVID-19 cases, are facing acute oxygen shortages.

"We have collapsed, Maharashtra is sinking and other states will follow," Dr. Jalil Parkar, a top pulmonologist at Mumbai's Lilavati Hospital, told NDTV journalist Barkha Dutt. "This is worse than World War II."

So serious are the drug and oxygen shortages some hospitals are now telling patients and their families to procure them directly from dealers.

The surge in COVID-19 cases is far outpacing the government's vaccination campaign. As infections began to spike in February and early March, Modi and his government cavalierly dismissed calls for action to stop the virus's spread, claiming that the answer to the contagion would be found in India's world-beating vaccination campaign. Health Minister Harsh Vardhan even fatuously boasted India was in "the

endgame” of the pandemic.

The much-vaunted vaccination drive is now in a shambles. As of Monday, April 19, just 8 percent of India’s 1.4 billion people had received a vaccination shot, and little more than 17 million people or 1.3 percent of India’s population were fully vaccinated.

Moreover, whilst India is the world’s largest vaccine producer, the supply of vaccines is running dry. This despite the Modi government imposing a reactionary export ban, which will have a devastating impact on the many low- and middle-income countries that were counting on Indian production for all or much of their vaccines.

Because they have lost or fear that they will lose their jobs and be left penniless by local lockdown measures, migrant workers are starting to flee major cities like Delhi and Mumbai. This raises the prospect of a further spread of the virus to rural India, where public health facilities are largely non-existent.

Last March and April, more than 10 million migrant workers returned to their villages in a chaotic mass migration prompted by the BJP government’s calamitous lockdown, which without any warning or provision of social support had suddenly deprived hundreds of millions of their livelihoods.

By Monday afternoon, 50,000 people had reportedly descended on Delhi’s bus depots in search of a means to get home. “We know very well after last year that no one will take care of us and hence I am going back,” one worker told NDTV. “When we are at home,” said a woman waiting for a bus to Bundelkhand, “we at least know we can ask someone for help and our children will not starve. Last year, we had to stand in queues and beg for food.”

While Indian authorities are criminally trying to downplay the significance of the emergence of new COVID-19 variants, they have rendered the pandemic more virulent and changed the profile of those becoming seriously ill and dying.

As elsewhere, the current wave of infections is striking down many more people in the prime of life. According to data from the Union government’s Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme, 31.5 percent of COVID-19 hospitalisations, or almost a third, are of people 39 years old and younger, with children and adolescents accounting for 5.8 percent of the hospitalised.

In addition to the three major global variants—the so-called British, South African and Brazilian strains of COVID-19—all of which are now circulating in the world’s second most populous country, India has seen the emergence of a so-called “double mutant” virus that combines two mutations identified elsewhere.

In Maharashtra, which has been averaging almost 55,000 infections per day for the past week, testing indicates that the double mutant was responsible for 20 percent of all new infections last week, and in some districts more than 60 percent.

Although the Indian double-mutant variant was first

identified late last year, and was quickly linked by some epidemiologists to the February spike in infections, the government, in keeping with its callous indifference to the health of the population, had less than 1 percent of positive COVID-19 samples genetically sequenced last month, thereby making it impossible to properly track the variants’ impact.

Determined to defend the profits and wealth of India’s elite, the Hindu-supremacist BJP government won’t take even the most minimal measures to safeguard the population in the face of this unfolding catastrophe. Yesterday, the Delhi High Court pointed to the government’s failure to immediately order the suspension of oxygen deliveries to all but essential industries, so hospitals could be resupplied. Noting that the government order banning the industrial use of oxygen will only take effect on Thursday, the court felt compelled to chastise the government, declaring, “Industry can wait. Patients cannot. ... Lives are at stake. Are you going to tell patient to wait till April 22 for oxygen?”

However, it is not only the Modi government that is responsible for the catastrophe now engulfing India. The entire ruling class and political establishment have blood on their hands. Maharashtra and Delhi, the two most severely impacted states, are led by the BJP’s ostensible political opponents, but they have pursued the same homicidal policy of prioritising corporate profit over workers’ lives. The corporate media, like the rest of big business, has railed against lockdowns. It cynically invokes the plight of the hundreds of millions of Indians whose meagre incomes were further reduced as a result of the pandemic, only in the next breath to celebrate the swelling fortunes of India’s billionaires as proof of Indian capitalism’s rise.

Indeed, while India’s workers and toilers were ravaged by the pandemic and its economic fallout, the ruling class gorged itself. According to *Forbes*’s 2021 billionaires list, the number of India’s dollar billionaires swelled from 102 to 144 last year and their wealth “nearly doubled to \$596 billion.”

The fight against the pandemic in India, as around the world, is a class struggle. It requires the independent political mobilisation of the working class to enforce a socialist programme that places human lives and social needs before capitalist profit, and appropriates the ill-gotten wealth of the bloated capitalist elite to fund the necessary public health measures and social supports needed to halt the virus’s spread until the population can be inoculated.



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