

India ravaged by COVID-19 pandemic—a global catastrophe

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India is now being ravaged by a tsunami of COVID-19 cases and deaths. This surge threatens to dwarf anything yet seen in a global pandemic that has already officially infected 145 million people and killed almost 3.1 million.

Yesterday India reported a single-day world record of 314,644 new COVID-19 cases, bringing the country's total new infections since Monday to well over 1.1 million, and an Indian record of 2,104 deaths.

Both the infection and death totals are undoubtedly gross undercounts. Death and cremation statistics tabulated by journalists and health experts reveal a vast discrepancy between the actual number of fatalities and the official numbers provided by government officials. A *Financial Times* study of seven of India's 718 districts concluded that the true death count could be 10 times higher than what is being officially reported.

Chilling reports are emerging from across the country of crematoriums and cemeteries engulfed by corpses. In Bhopal, India's 16th largest city, crematoriums are said to be operating at their highest levels since the 1984 Union Carbide gas leak disaster, which killed more than 2,200 people in its first hours. In the western state of Gujarat, where crematoriums have been working 24 hours nonstop, their metal supports have reportedly begun to melt.

India's ramshackle health care system is collapsing, as chronically understaffed hospitals run out of beds, oxygen, and anti-COVID 19 drugs like Remdesivir. News reports from Delhi and Mumbai, respectively the capital and financial centre, show crowds of COVID-19 victims and their relatives outside hospitals clamouring for help, only to be told none is available.

Yet India's government and ruling elite are utterly indifferent and impervious to this mass suffering and death.

Prioritising corporate profits over working people's health and lives, India's national and state governments have adamantly refused to order a lockdown as COVID-19 infections cases rose with ever increasing speed for the past two months.

In an address to the nation Tuesday evening, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proclaimed 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," he declared. He then went on to urge state governments to similarly forswear lockdowns.

Dire and harrowing as is the current situation, all evidence suggests that infections and deaths will continue to grow exponentially for weeks, even months, to come.

In the two weeks since April 8, the number of active cases in India rose more than 250 percent, from 910,000 to almost 2.3 million. This

surge is being fueled by new, more infectious and lethal variants, including a "double-mutant" strain first identified in India that combines mutations in two different "variants of concern."

All but a tiny fraction of the population remain at risk of infection. Just 8.4 percent of Indians have received a first vaccine dose, and only 1.4 percent are fully inoculated.

Moreover, hundreds of millions are desperately poor and malnourished, lack ready access to clean water, and live in one-room dwellings, meaning they cannot implement social distancing measures and, in many cases, are already in compromised health. If, as has been tragically demonstrated in recent days, hospitals in the country's largest cities are being overwhelmed, the situation remains bleaker still in the large swaths of rural India, where public health facilities are all but nonexistent.

The catastrophe in India, it must be emphasized, is a global catastrophe in the face of a virus that respects no national borders and needs no passport. The decision of the world's governments, led by the United States and the other imperialist powers, to abandon any systematic effort to halt the spread of the pandemic has created conditions in which COVID-19 has been able to mutate and develop more virulent, potentially vaccine-resistant strains. Unless and until there is a coordinated global, science-based effort to eradicate COVID-19 predicated on protecting people's lives, not capitalist profit, this process will continue. Sparks from the current pandemic wildfire in India will cause blazes around the world. Indeed, cases of the Indian double-mutant variant are now being reported in North America, Europe and the Middle East.

Furthermore, in a reactionary, panicked response to the disaster produced by its own actions, India, a major supplier of generic drugs and vaccines to middle- and low-income countries, has stopped the export of COVID-19 vaccines.

What stands in the way of mobilizing the world's resources to fight the pandemic are the profit and predatory geopolitical interests of the rival national-based capitalist cliques.

Take the case of India. Not just Modi and his far-right Hindu supremacist BJP are responsible for the mass death that now stalks the world's second most populous country. The entire ruling class and political establishment are responsible.

For decades, the Indian state, whether under governments led by the BJP or Congress Party, has spent a derisory 1.5 percent of GDP on health care. Although the World Health Organization, among many others, pointed to India's great vulnerability in the face of COVID-19, due to its mass poverty and derelict health care system, the Modi government took no substantive measures to fight the pandemic for the first two and a half months of 2020. Then on March 25, with no

foreplanning and less than four hours' notice, it imposed a calamitous nationwide lockdown that failed by every measure. Failed because it was not accompanied by mass testing and contact tracing, a vast infusion of resources into the health care system, and the provision of social support to the hundreds of millions whom the lockdown deprived of their livelihoods overnight.

Subsequently, spearheaded by the Modi government, but with the support of the state governments whether led by the BJP or the ostensible opposition parties, India embraced a policy of "herd immunity." Beginning at the end of April, the government started "reopening" its economy and this continued, with one measure after another jettisoned over the next six months as infections and deaths soared.

Giving voice to the mindset of the ruling elite, Modi government health advisor and epidemiologist Jayaprakash Muliyi blithely declared that given the immense size of the country's population, mass deaths on a scale not seen outside the world wars of the last century would be acceptable. "With a substantial opening up of the lockdown, India may see at least two million deaths," said Muliyi. "Mortality is low, let the young go out and work."

As India's COVID-19 "second wave" gathered strength in late February and March, the political establishment in unison declaimed against lockdown measures. Taking their cue from Modi, they pronounced India's supposedly "world-beating" vaccination campaign as the answer to the pandemic. In this they were acting at the behest of big business, whose media voices like the *Times of India* have been churning out editorial after editorial denouncing "lockdowns" as "unaffordable."

To further this mercenary campaign, they have cynically pointed to the hundreds of millions whose livelihoods have been devastated by the pandemic. A recently published Pew Research study found the number of Indians earning less than 150 rupees per day (US \$2) more than doubled during the pandemic's first wave to 135 million, and that 32 million more had seen their income fall below \$10 per day.

For the political and ideological representatives of the ruling class, it is, of course, unthinkable that even a fraction of the fortunes of India's billionaires—which, according to *Forbes*, nearly doubled to \$596 billion in 2020—be seized to provide social support to the population while the spread of the pandemic is halted.

The "open" economy, "herd immunity" policy of the Modi government is the cutting edge of an intensified assault on the working class and rural masses. In the name of reviving the economy, Modi has introduced a raft of "pro-investor" measures. These include a fire sale of public sector enterprises, a pro-agribusiness reform of farm laws, and changes to the labor code to further expand precarious contract employment, empower large employers to fire workers at will and outlaw most strikes.

At the same time, the BJP government has further integrated India into US imperialism's war drive against China, through the US-led Quad, and a growing web of bilateral and trilateral strategic ties with Washington's principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. This is both to strengthen the India capitalist elite's hand against the working class and pursue its own great power ambitions.

This class war assault and the Modi government's attempt to whip up communalism so as to divide the working class are encountering mass opposition. Strikes and protests have erupted across the country against speedup, poverty wages and the lack of PPE (personal protective equipment). Tens of millions joined a one-day nationwide strike last November 26 to oppose the government's pro-investor

reforms and demand emergency support for the hundreds of millions whose incomes have been slashed by the pandemic. And for the past five months hundreds of thousands of farmers have been camped on the outskirts of Delhi to demand the repeal of Modi's farm laws.

But as everywhere the striving of the working class to assert its class interests is immediately blocked by the organizations that claim to speak in its name: the procapitalist trade unions and the establishment left parties. Under conditions of the eruption of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of 1930s the twin Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India—have cemented their political alliance with the Congress Party. The traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie, the Congress Party has focused much of its attack on Modi over the past year on the claim that he is "soft on China."

The pandemic has starkly revealed the utter incompatibility of the capitalist profit system and the selfish class interests of the bourgeoisie with the most essential needs of society. At the same time, it has exacerbated all of the malignancies that have increasingly characterized capitalism for decades—ever growing social inequality, intensifying interimperialist conflict and great power rivalry, the breakdown of bourgeois democracy and the ruling class's cultivation of far-right, fascist forces.

The pandemic is a global crisis that can only be brought under control through the coordinated independent action of the international working class to impose the public health measures and secure the social support needed to protect workers' lives and livelihoods worldwide.

Likewise workers' efforts to defend their social and democratic rights and oppose imperialist war and reaction is a global struggle that necessitates the building of new mass organizations. Against the transnational corporations, the rival capitalist governments, and the trade and military alliances through which they seek to advance their predatory global ambitions, the working class must mount a common and coordinated struggle on the basis of a socialist internationalist program.

It is to develop such a global movement animated by the great liberating ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky that the *World Socialist Web Site* and International Committee of the Fourth International are holding an online May Day rally on Saturday, May 1—"One year of the coronavirus: From global pandemic to global class struggle." We urge workers, youth and socialist-minded professionals in India and throughout the world to make plans to attend the event.



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