Australian students and workers oppose government ban on citizens returning from India

Our reporters
7 May 2021

The Liberal-National Coalition government announced last Friday that all Australian citizens trapped in India, where the COVID-19 pandemic is raging out of control, are forbidden from returning to Australia until at least May 15, under the threat of criminal action including imprisonment and massive fines.

The blatantly anti-democratic and callous declaration has provoked widespread opposition. There is grave concern, not only for the thousands of Australian citizens stranded overseas, but also over the deadly situation facing the Indian population, including many thousands with relatives in Australia.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality have spoken to students and workers about the blockade and the broader crisis in India.

Sachith, a tertiary teacher from Melbourne, said "this ban is bad. It is unconstitutional for Australians. To me, it is the government's duty to provide safe travel if the citizens want to come back, and to provide assistance to them. I cannot see a plan to get citizens home and that to me is the most worrying thing."

Commenting on the situation in India, Sachith said the health system is "cracking. There is a huge influx of sick people and a lot of fear. People are fearful of what will happen. All the hospitals are full of patients. There is a huge triage system. If people are not severely ill, they are not coming into the hospital."

Sachith's entire family lives in South India. "Their situation is very bad, they all have COVID," he said. "I have been very worried. My family got the vaccine because they are frontline workers in the COVID zone, but COVID is part and parcel of their life. My parents had COVID, and they have now had the vaccine. My brother and sister also tested positive."

Sasikala, a nurse also from Melbourne, stated that "in India, they're struggling for life, worried for life. It is painful to see them suffering like that. We have cousins, brothers, sisters, they can't go anywhere, they are imprisoned inside the house. My family comes from southern India, and my husband's family is northern."

On the Australian government ban Sasikala said: "You can't ban one country, it is discrimination, but this is happening everywhere. It is not only Australia that hasn't given much help to India, but other countries as well. It is painful to see.

"We all have to share everything. Even wealthy people have to donate, it should come out of their bank balance. When the world is in such a crisis every country has to think about helping every other country. Why are we worrying about differences? Why fight now? Really, I don't know if the government is helping people or creating the problem."

The WSWS also spoke to Diya (pseudonym), a 26-year-old Indian student who is completing a double Masters degree at Macquarie University in Sydney. In order to meet her visa requirements, she is forced to complete 8 units of study each year. She is currently paying $5,000 per unit of study.

Diya said her experience of studying in Australia "has been a roller coaster ride coming from India trying to make ends meet. And I really thought that Australia, as a first world country, would welcome international students. At first, I did feel welcomed. But with the COVID-19 crisis, I have started feeling not at home over here."

Diya referred to the discrimination she, and

international students face, when it comes to employment opportunities. "It makes me feel sad because I don't come from a wealthy family," she said. "I come from a middle-class family and it's difficult for my parents to pay my tuition fees. The fees for international students are three to four times higher than those for domestic students."

To lessen the burden on her parents, Diya started working day and night. However, once the pandemic hit she struggled to get work and the only support she received from the Australian government was 12 weeks of free accommodation.

"I couldn't get any work from March to October due to everything being shut down," she explained. "The university gave student loans and grants which, to be honest, are like another part of their business. I feel exploited by these universities."

Diya described how the loan system worked from the university: "They gave us a $2,000 grant and $2,000 loan. So, $2,000 without repayment, but how can $2,000 allow you to survive six to seven months? I am paying $250 per week for one room in a shared apartment. And they increased the fees by $1,000 per unit, can you imagine?"

On the India ban, Diya described the situation she and thousands of international students are facing. "We are literally stuck here," she commented. "We can't go back to India because if we go back, we can't return to Australia, we'll be fined. It's such a sad state of affairs that people of Indian origin, who have now become Australian citizens, also can't come back. It is illegal for them to come back to Australia. These people thought Australia was their country because they've got citizenship, but no! It's discriminatory."

Another international student at the University of Melbourne wished to remain anonymous. She stated that "the situation facing international students is not fair. They are taking international students, but they are not allowing them to come in. I came in February 2020 and we were not fairly treated. People have come here to have a career. They couldn't just drop everything and go home. Now I am working part-time, and financially it is a bit better now, but last year I had to ask for help from my parents."

Asked about the situation in India, she said: "My parents are there, it's really bad. My mother is in her late 40s, my father is in his 50s. They are in Mumbai.

We can't rely on the official numbers of COVID infections and deaths. It is probably much worse than reported.

"The Indian government should have taken precautions. Instead they had large rallies for the upcoming elections. There was the biggest mistake of the Modi government. And the politics in India means that some states are not getting much vaccine. Vaccine is available nowhere in Mumbai."

Commenting on the Australian blockade, she said: "If this ban is going to go for very long, the government should think of Australian citizens in India. They should consider their situation, it is very unsafe. I think the COVID situation in Australia is not out of control and the Australian government should help India much more than they have."

She concluded: "It is OK to protect one's own country against the pandemic, but it is important to think about the whole world. It is not just one place which should be left to fight alone."