

The Indian ruling elite's criminal response to the pandemic—a global catastrophe

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7 May 2021

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The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the world, quickly exhausting the lexicon of macabre words with which to describe mass suffering and death. But the calamity now unfolding in India marks, by any measure, a horrific new stage in the global pandemic.

Many of you from outside South Asia will have seen or read reports of desperately ill people being refused admittance to hospitals in India's capital Delhi and financial centre Mumbai due to personnel, bed, drug and oxygen shortages; of patients dying of asphyxiation in hospitals whose medical oxygen supply has run out; and of mountains of corpses waiting for cremation or burial. In Gujarat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, the metal frames of crematorium furnaces, forced to operate 24 hours per day, are cracking and melting.

Since April 4, when India recorded more than 100,000 new infections for the first time in seven months, total COVID-19 cases have surged by more than 6 million, according to the official government tally. And there have been more than 45,000 additional deaths, including more than 10,000 in the past three days. India's seven-day average of daily new cases now exceeds 350,000, or more than three-and-a-half times the total number of COVID-19 cases in China since the virus first emerged there some 16 months ago.

Bare statistics cannot give a true sense of the human catastrophe now unfolding in India, of the lives lost and livelihoods destroyed. Were one speaking of Europe or America this would be equally true.

Only in India's case, the figures, harrowing as they are, grossly understate the number of COVID-19 infections

and deaths. Studies that compare death figures provided by authorities in localities spread across India with crematorium and graveyard records show the actual number of fatalities in recent weeks to be five, even 10 times higher.

Moreover, everything from the official number of active infections—which currently stands at well over 3 million—to the ramshackle state of India's health care system and the poverty and poor health of its people, hundreds of millions of whom are malnourished in the best of times, indicates that India's so-called second wave is only in its initial stages.

That this is a global catastrophe that threatens people around the world is underscored by the emergence of new, more contagious and potentially vaccine-resistant strains of COVID-19, including India's so-called double-mutant variant.

Yet Modi, his far-right, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, and the Indian ruling class remain resolute: resolute in the pursuit of their selfish class interests, in prioritizing capitalist profit over human lives.

Rephrasing the homicidal capitalist mantra that “the cure must not be worse than the disease,” Modi proclaimed in an address to the nation last week, “In today's situation, we have to save the country from lockdown.” That is, the overriding aim of Modi and his government is to keep the economy “open,” not save lives.

India is an historically oppressed country. But alongside mass poverty and backwardness, it has significant industrial capacity, advanced technology, and pools of vast wealth. Wealth that has become even more concentrated in the hands of the few during the pandemic. According to *Forbes*, in 2020 the wealth of India's billionaires nearly doubled to \$596 billion.

Yet none of these resources have been mobilized to

fight the pandemic. For this, all sections of the political establishment and ruling class are culpable. For decades, the Indian state, whether under Congress Party or BJP-led Union governments, has spent a minuscule 1.5 percent of GDP on health care. The opposition-led state governments are as vehemently opposed as those led by the BJP to shutting down nonessential businesses and providing working people with the social support to shelter at home so as to halt the spread of the deadly virus.

The ruling class' herd immunity policy is the cutting edge of an intensified class war assault on India's workers and toilers. In the name of reviving the economy, the Modi government has initiated a fire sale of public assets, passed a battery of pro-agribusiness laws, and amended the labour code to further promote precarious contract-labour reemployment and outlaw most worker job action. At the same time, it has further integrated India into US imperialism's war drive against China, forging a web of new quadrilateral, trilateral and bilateral military-strategic ties with Washington and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Next month will mark 30 years since the Indian bourgeoisie abandoned its state-led development project, which it cynically labelled socialism, in favour of full integration into the US imperialist-led world capitalist order. What the bourgeoisie has wrought—behind all the hype, echoed and amplified by the Western media about India's capitalist rise—has now been laid bare for the world to see. While the mass of the population is condemned to want, hunger and death, a tiny minority gorge on wealth that would put the Mughals or even the more rapacious British colonial East India Company to shame. In Modi, the Hindu-supremacist thug who first came to national prominence by instigating the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, India's CEO and billionaires have a fitting political representative.

The past three decades, however, have not simply been lived in vain. As elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America, capitalist globalization has vastly increased the size and social power of the working class in India, and through the production process organically tied it to workers around the world, including its class brothers and sisters in the imperialist centres of Europe and North America.

The mass social anger against the Modi regime and the barbarity of Indian capitalism has exploded in recent months in a wave of strikes and protests against speed-up, poverty wages and the lack of personal protective equipment or PPE involving, among others, Toyota auto

workers, Karnataka public transport workers and Delhi nurses. Last November 26 tens of millions across India joined a one-day general strike.

But the working class in India, as everywhere else, comes up against the fact that the organizations that claim to speak in its name are instruments of the bourgeoisie for suppressing, not waging, the class struggle. The twin Stalinist Communist parties and their trade union affiliates have supported the ruling class in its 30-year drive to make India the premier cheap-labour haven for global capital, propping up one right-wing national government after another and implementing what they unabashedly call "pro-investor" policies in the states where they have held office. The Stalinists mouth support for the five-month-long mass agitation of India's farmers. But they have done everything to isolate it from the working class, and attach it to their electoral alliance and other sordid maneuvers with the Congress Party—which, it need be noted, has spent much of the past year attacking Modi for purportedly being too soft on China.

Indian workers and youth must take their place alongside their class brothers and sisters around the world in building new organizations of mass struggle, animated by a socialist and internationalist program, including rank-and-file committees affiliated to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees.

The foremost task is the building of a revolutionary party of the working class—an Indian section of the International Committee Fourth International. Based on the program that animated the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, the program of Permanent Revolution, it will fight to mobilize the working class as an independent political power, rallying the rural toilers and all the oppressed in revolutionary struggle against the India bourgeoisie and all its political representatives. None of the burning problems facing the Indian masses—from the fight against the pandemic, social inequality and the threat of war, to the eradication of caste oppression and the defeat of communal reaction—can be addressed outside of the struggle against Indian and world capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of global socioeconomic life.



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