

Modi pledges to “save India from lockdown”—not infection and death

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India, home to more than one-sixth of the world’s population, is now engulfed by a health and social catastrophe that was both foreseeable and foreseen.

Just in the past five days, India officially recorded 2 million new COVID-19 infections and 20,928 deaths. Since Monday, April 12, India’s COVID-19 cases have risen by 8.99 million, or more than 65 percent, bringing its total infections since the pandemic began to 22.6 million. During the same four-week period, the novel coronavirus killed 75,213 Indians, more people than it has killed in all but 11 countries throughout the entire pandemic.

Harrowing as these figures are, they represent a mere fraction of India’s true number of infections and deaths, as is conceded by all but the most inveterate defenders of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

Union Health Ministry data shows COVID-19 test positivity rates currently running at more than 20 percent in 301 of India’s 718 districts, and more than 30 percent in Delhi, India’s national capital and largest urban agglomeration. The World Health Organization (WHO) has long insisted a positivity rate of 5 percent or higher indicates a serious undercount of infections.

Prior to the pandemic, India’s ramshackle, chronically underfunded health care system recorded the medical cause of only a quarter of all deaths, with many deaths in rural India not even registered. Studies and surveys in recent weeks by health experts and journalists have shown that many times more people are being cremated and buried under COVID-19 protocols than are reported in the authorities’ death counts. To cite one example, a daily newspaper in Modi’s home state of Gujarat, *Sandesh*, has found that just one in 10 COVID-19 deaths in the state’s major urban centers is officially being attributed to the pandemic. In Rajkot, a city of 2 million, the official statistics showed 220 people had died of COVID-19 in the latter half of April. However, during that same period just one of the city’s “seven coronavirus-only” crematoriums handled 673 corpses.

Across India and around the world people have been shocked and angered by the media reports of desperately ill people in Delhi, Mumbai and other major cities unable to gain admittance to overwhelmed health care facilities, of scores of patients dying from asphyxiation after their hospital ran out of medical oxygen, and of a burgeoning black market in oxygen cylinders and drugs, like Remdesivir, that are in short supply.

In rural India, where two-thirds of the country’s population lives and where public health care facilities are largely non-existent, the

catastrophe threatens to be greater still. In 15 rural districts, most or all with a population of a million or more, the COVID-19 test positivity rate is currently higher than 50 percent.

India’s venal capitalist elite—led by the Hindu supremacist, would-be authoritarian strongman Modi—is impervious to the carnage the pandemic is exacting on the lives and livelihoods of working people.

In a nationwide address April 20, Modi proclaimed that his government’s overriding objective is “to save this country from lockdown”—that is to prop up the fortunes and profits of India’s billionaires and corporate elite, not to fight the virus and save lives. He went on to urge even the states hardest-hit by COVID-19 to eschew lockdowns in favour of so-called “micro-containment zones.”

After millions more cases and tens of thousands more deaths, this remains state policy.

Declaring “life is more precious than the economy,” the Indian Medical Association (IMA), the country’s largest organisation of doctors, denounced the BJP government’s failure to impose a national lockdown to halt the virus’ deadly surge and allow “health infrastructure to recoup” in a statement issued last Saturday. “We are astonished,” said the IMA, “to see the extreme lethargy and inappropriate actions from the Health Ministry in combating the agonising crisis born out of the devastating second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Noting that it has been pressing for a national lockdown for the past three weeks, the IMA charged the Modi government with filing the requests that it and other scientific experts have made into “the dust bin,” and taking decisions “without realizing the ground realities.” This has resulted in the number of COVID-stricken patients rising “beyond four lakh (400,000) every day” and “moderate to severe cases” swelling to “nearly 40 percent.”

The second wave of India’s pandemic began in mid-February and shortly thereafter medical experts began issuing ever more emphatic and dire warnings that India was completely unprepared for COVID-19’s resurgence. All the more so, since everything indicated the virus’ spread was being fuelled by more contagious and lethal variants, including the B.1.1.7 variant first identified in Britain, and India’s own “double mutant” strain. In early March a team of medical experts that reports directly to Modi explicitly warned about the threat of an impending medical oxygen shortage.

Yet the government, acting at the behest of corporate India, cavalierly dismissed all this. With the aim of projecting India’s

return to “normalcy,” it pressed forward with jettisoning the few remaining COVID-19 restrictions, including by greenlighting mass state election rallies and the world’s largest religious festival (the Kumbh Melah). In so far as it conceded the pandemic remained a threat this was to be dealt with through a “world-leading” vaccination campaign—a campaign that is now in a shambles due to vaccine shortages. To date, less than 10 percent of Indians have received a first shot and barely 2.5 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

The Congress Party and other opposition parties are now making timid criticisms of the Modi government’s ruinous mishandling of the pandemic. But they are no less criminally culpable. All state governments, including those led by the opposition, implemented Modi’s homicidal “open economy” policy. In recent days, as public anger over the disaster mounts, some, such as the governments of Maharashtra and Delhi, have announced “lockdowns,” but these only perpetuate the prioritizing of profit over lives. First, virtually all production, from manufacturing to construction is excluded; and second, at most, famine-style relief is being provided to the day-labourers, service sector workers, hawkers and artisans who are directly impacted by the lockdown measures. This under conditions where the central government’s ill-prepared lockdown of last March—which robbed a hundred million people of their livelihood overnight with no meaningful provision for social support—pushed a further 230 million Indians below the national poverty line of 375 rupees (US \$5) a day.

The Indian ruling class’ herd immunity policy, its calculated decision to let the virus rip through the population so as not to disrupt profit-making, is the cutting edge of its drive to dramatically intensify the exploitation of the working class and rural toilers. To enthusiastic applause from big business, Modi in the name of “reviving the economy” has implemented a raft of pro-investor policies over the past 12 months, from a fire-sale of public assets to a battery of pro-agribusiness laws and a reform of the labour code under which most worker job action would be illegal.

This class-war assault is encountering mass opposition from the working class and rural poor. If the BJP, including the Hindu supremacist thug Modi appointed as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, have lashed out with arrests and censorship to suppress the public outcry over bed and oxygen shortages, it is because they fear it will further fuel and intersect with the growing challenge from the working class.

India is a historically oppressed country, blighted by poverty and squalor. Nevertheless, it has advanced production facilities, including in the pharmaceutical sector; and pockets of vast wealth, beginning with the fortunes of its 130 billionaires, whose holdings nearly doubled to \$594 billion last year. Moreover, the Indian state commands immense resources, enough to make it, at \$72.9 billion, the world’s third largest military spender.

Yet not even a tiny fraction of these resources can be mobilized to protect the lives and livelihoods of the Indian people. Even now, the government refuses to fund, at an estimated cost of just \$6.7 billion, the free inoculation of all adult Indians against COVID-19.

From London, where he had been invited to attend a G7 meeting, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar found himself forced to concede last week two incontrovertible facts: for decades,

irrespective of whether the BJP or Congress has led the central government the Indian state has spent a miniscule 1.5 percent of GDP on health care, and the pandemic has “exposed” the utter failure of India’s health care system. He then bleated, “It’s very easy to say today that we should have put in more money. Now that I am in government ... I can say it is not as easy as it sounds.”

Jaishankar’s apologia only serves to underscore that capitalism is in irreconcilable conflict with the needs of society. The pandemic has spelled this out in flesh and blood—but the same conflict pervades every aspect of socioeconomic life, from the misery and social anxiety caused by poverty and economic insecurity amid unprecedented global abundance, to environmental devastation and imperialist aggression and war.

India’s horrific “second wave” is a global threat. It has already spilled over into Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Moreover, in so far as the virus is not eradicated, it threatens to develop strains that are resistant to existing vaccines.

The Indian catastrophe has the fingerprints of the imperialist powers, beginning with Washington, all over it. Not only did the American ruling class spearhead the herd immunity strategy under the *New York Times*’ coined tagline, “The cure must not be worse than the disease.” It, along with Canada and the EU powers, has refused to waive vaccine patent rights, and during the critical weeks in March and April when COVID-19 infections were exploding in India, the Biden administration even blocked the export of raw materials critical to India’s manufacture of vaccines. Last but not least, Washington, whether under Trump or Biden, has spent much of the last year seeking to incite India against China, with the aim of further integrating it into US imperialism’s incendiary military-strategic offensive against Beijing. The implementation of a rational, science-based plan to protect lives and livelihoods requires the independent political intervention of the working class and its mobilization as a global force.

The immediate shut-down of all non-essential businesses and in-class instruction, the provision of full wages to all affected workers, a vast expansion of the public health system—all of the essential measures that are needed to halt the virus’ spread are in irreconcilable conflict with the profit and geopolitical imperatives of the rival national capitalist elites.

The fight against the pandemic must, therefore, be animated by a socialist perspective and advance through the building of new organizations of working class struggle, in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions, which in India as around the world have enforced the ruling class’ back-to-work/back-to-school policy. Toward this end, and as an inseparable part of its struggle to politically educate and mobilize the working class for world socialist revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties have initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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