

Workers and youth condemn Australian government ban on citizens returning from India

Our reporters
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Since it was imposed earlier this month, opposition has mounted against the Australian government's anti-democratic ban on citizens returning from India, where they face the prospect of COVID-19 infection and even death, amid that country's coronavirus catastrophe.

The government has rejected condemnations of the blockade from civil liberties organisations and legal experts as a violation of the human right of citizens to return to their country of origin. Instead, the ban will remain in force, until at least May 15, when it is set to elapse.

Government ministers have outlined plans for just six repatriation flights, grossly inadequate given there are 9,000 stranded Australian citizens, more than 600 of whom are confirmed to be vulnerable. Citizens who test positive will not be permitted to board and will be left to their fate in the Indian hospital system. At least one Australian permanent resident has died of the virus in India over recent weeks.

At the same time, Tuesday's budget provided no funds to develop purpose-built quarantine facilities. Returnees will continue to primarily be sent to the shambolic hotel quarantine system, responsible for at least 17 COVID-19 outbreaks in the Australian community over the past six months. The imposition of the ban, in addition to being a blatant act of discrimination, was a tacit admission that the hotel quarantine program has been a failure.

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.

Lalit, a tertiary student who moved to Australia from India 22 years ago, said that he has an acquaintance

who has been stuck in India for five to six months. "He went to India for a month and couldn't come back, even though his wife and daughter are in Australia," Lalit said.

"People have paid travel agents and then flights have been cancelled; they don't know when they will get refunded or how much will be refunded. However, the rich elite are leaving India. They are hiring private planes to Dubai and then they fly somewhere else. My friend who is a private pilot is working twice as much as before the pandemic."

Lalit said the travel ban "reminds me of the White Australia policy. It could very well set a precedent for the future. The Australian constitution does not have a bill of rights or freedom of speech. They have given enormous powers to the government at this time. Being from an Indian background, I know a lot of people do go back to visit parents and relatives. It could have a very bad effect for the future for migrants."

On the pitiful aid offered by the Australian government to India, Lalit described it as a "pinch of salt in the ocean. Five hundred ventilators in a population of 1.25 billion is nothing. They will be used by the elite class, they will never reach those people who are in need."

Asked about the broader coronavirus crisis, Lalit stated: "Throughout the world governments have not gone for lockdowns that could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives. The British prime minister and Indian prime minister have said we have to avoid the lockdowns. Not avoid the virus but avoid the lockdowns. The ruling class says profits should not stop; if people are dying then that is fine.

"When all of humanity is at risk, ending lockdowns is

criminal negligence, putting children and workers in the line of fire. The only reason to reopen is because they want economic activities to go on.

If the whole world had acted collectively, this could have been overcome. Governments should have taken care of the workers who could not work from home. In India they have not done any preparation. They were busy in their political rallies and profit making.

“I don’t have any belief that the ruling class can change this. The only force capable of dealing with a pandemic and working for the betterment of the world is the working class, under the leadership of the Fourth International.”

Margaret Smith, a former librarian from Melbourne, Victoria, said that she considers “the threat of fines and goal term discriminatory. The ban shows, yet again, the inability of the government to work out a compassionate/humane solution, such as vaccinating people in India and working out airlifts etc.

“Many of my Indian friends and colleagues have lost some family members. They also know that the numbers are far worse than reported in the Australian press.”

Margaret said that she sees the ban as “an attack on basic human rights, especially because to become an Australian citizen Indians have had to give up their Indian citizenship. I am quite sure the Australian government would try this again, but the outcry and protest may deter another attempt for the short term.”

Margaret spoke on the role of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. “Like Trump and other autocrats/dictators, the Indian PM has not told the truth,” she said.

“BJP members espouse absolute bunkum about COVID-19, its cause, its transmission and so on. But I think the lack of responsibility in leadership, not cancelling mass political rallies and mass religious observances, too slow with lockdowns, should be held accountable. One could make the case that this failure of strong government has led to mass deaths and Modi be brought to trial.”

Margaret warned against the broader drive to end all pandemic safety measures internationally, “because as scientists and health experts have cautioned, there is so much to learn about this virus and its mutations. The Australian government has been too quick to claim we

are ‘on top of it,’ ‘we lead the world,’ but it has been unable to take time in the last year to work through how we can improve quarantine facilities and construct emergency facilities for quarantining Australians to return.

“The push by some big businesses to ‘return to normal’ has exposed the deep inequalities in our system. The effects of the pandemic are not known and will take much more time. At this stage it seems the gap between rich and poor is widening.”

Arjun, a casual teacher in Sydney of Fijian-Indian background, said: “There should be more people voicing themselves. The government decides everything, and they just walk with it, without discussing it with the public. People don’t have a voice. It’s getting to be like a dictatorship. Also, a lot of scientists are not heard. The government just ignores them.”

On the quarantine situation in Australia, Arjun stated: “There should definitely be a proper quarantine facility and the government should be formulating that. There are so many facilities out there that are empty. Rather than giving the hoteliers big bucks, this money should be going into facilitating isolated places which have been left abandoned. The other thing is there are so many ships and planes not being utilised. Why can’t they use those as a quarantine station?”

Jigar, an IT worker from the Hunter Valley in regional New South Wales, said: “I have no idea why the government has imposed this penalty for citizens returning from India and no other countries.

“If the government had expanded quarantine capacity sooner, we could have gotten these 9,000 people in India and others elsewhere brought home sooner. We shouldn’t have held the Australian Tennis Open back in February, nor should they have held the cricket in India. This could have been stopped.

“Personally I don’t trust the governments, including the decisions made by Modi and the Morrison government. Banning the flights was their decision. I don’t know what the basis of the decision was.”



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