Indian and Sri Lankan workers and students explain why they are attending the May 30 meeting on India's COVID-19 catastrophe

Our reporters
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Indian and Sri Lankan workers and students spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* this week about the forthcoming meeting, "The coronavirus pandemic in India and the need for a socialist strategy." The online event, which is organised by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, will be held on Sunday, May 30, at 6 p.m., Indian Standard Time.

The meeting is being held as COVID-19 sweeps like a tsunami across India, leaving millions infected and hundreds of thousands dead. Meeting speakers will review how the criminal "herd immunity" policy pursued by the capitalist ruling class in India, and in other countries, has led to the present catastrophe and why a revolutionary socialist strategy is the only way to combat this unprecedented social disaster.

S. M. Vasan, a conductor at the public transport service in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, explained why he was attending.

"The extremely destructive and growing coronavirus pandemic is becoming clearer and clearer to working people. It is exposing the callous indifference of the central and state governments towards the social well-being, safety and lives of workers and the common people.

"The government deducts money from the monthly salaries of state sector workers for medical insurance, but when workers need help they don't get any benefit from these deductions. The medical insurance card that workers have is of no real use at whichever hospital they go to for treatment.

"The present social crisis demands a massive development of India's health infrastructure. It is now over seven decades since the country gained independence, but our rulers have still not established medical centres to provide basic treatment in every district. The political parties spend a huge amount of money during the elections but for short-term gains. This money could have been utilised to meet the basic needs of the people."

Vasan outlined some of the anti-working-class measures imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government since it came to power: "The Modi government has introduced many new bills that are detrimental to working people, including demonetisation, GST [Goods and Service Tax], amendment of labour laws, longer working hours, attacks on basic rights and privatisation of public sector industries. It also refuses to eliminate the GST on essential products such as oxygen. This is an anti-worker government.

"I would like to thank WSWS comrades for taking up the struggle for a socialist alternative at the international level. No other political parties are doing this."

Pechiyammal, a former teacher from southern Tamil Nadu, said she was "very interested" in the May 30 meeting and had already registered. "Had the lockdown measures been implemented strictly from the very beginning, the virus could have been largely contained. I also feel that full action must be taken to prevent the loss of life from hunger."

Sumita, a Bachelor of Education student in Kolkata, said: "The people of India have been devastated by the pandemic and are looking for an alternative to vent their feelings about the situation. This meeting is significant because it provides an alternative strategy to the working class and will help them stay strong in these difficult times.

"I've decided to attend in order to learn more about the current situation around the world. The mainstream media in this country is full of falsified news and can't stop glorifying the one and only important bearded man [Modi]. I'm obviously looking for more reliable information.

"The rural areas where most of India's population resides have weak medical infrastructural facilities and these have been pushed to the brink. Modi claimed early this year that India was carrying out the 'world's largest vaccination program.' But most people, especially the poor, have no chance of being vaccinated. Contrary to the government boasts, what we see are more and more dead bodies floating in the rivers due to the lack of cremation space."

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Leon, a young WSWS reader from Bangalore, said: "A meeting to discuss the socialist strategy required to curb and manage the pandemic is absolutely necessary. The strategies provided by the capitalist countries have failed miserably, not just in developing countries, such as India, but in the developed nations of the West.

"I'll be attending the meeting because I'm curious to learn and understand the way the WSWS works and how it addresses the current crisis. I would also like to know how I could contribute towards such progressive initiatives."

Leon said the Modi government "has failed at every level and at every step of this crucial journey, Black marketers, hoarders, unethical businesses and private hospitals have looted the common man and pushed millions into poverty.

"The inadequate health infrastructure was, and still is, overwhelmed. Public health was already in a sorry state and this pandemic has exposed the gaps. The private health sector has opportunistically fleeced vulnerable people who have been willing to give their all to save their loved ones. This is the disgusting nature of our health care system."

Somak, a student from Kolkata, stated: "WSWS articles and analysis about society and the working class on a Marxist basis are really good. They connect me with the real situation and help me to understand current developments.

"The Modi Government completely failed to tackle this situation from the very beginning. Sunday's meeting is very important to workers, students and youth and will show them how to fight the devastation caused by the pandemic."

SEP members in Sri Lanka spoke to several workers and students.

Kodithuwakku, a technology teacher from Colombo, said Sunday's meeting was "crucial" for the international working class and would have a "big impact" on building the socialist movement in South Asia.

"The serious consequences of social inequality amid the pandemic are more visible in India than in any other country. While numbers of the world's richest people live in India, the oppressed are dying on the streets.

"Current developments again confirm that the working class must take the lead in a political fight to eradicate this pandemic. In India, where there is a large peasantry and numbers of other oppressed groups, the working class has the historic task of providing leadership to the masses."

Kaandeepan from the Glenugie Estate in Sri Lanka's hill-country plantation district said that the coronavirus has severely hit plantation workers.

"They were first affected early last year when plantation youth working in Colombo and other districts to support their families, had to return to their plantation homes during the lockdown." These young workers, he continued, "are now fully dependent on the meagre wages earned by their older family members in the estates, where management is cutting jobs and working days.

"Jeevan Thondaman [leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, the main plantation union and a minister in Sri Lanka's Rajapakse government] says workers should not fear COVID-19 but increase production and pluck more tea leaves. But the workers are afraid. Having previously known little about COVID-19, they now see the situation in India—floating bodies in rivers and people dying in roads—and rising infection numbers on the plantations, so they now understand the dangers.

Kaandeepan explained that the government had implemented an island-wide travel ban, but plantation and garment workers had to "risk their lives" and keep working in order to feed their children. "No arrangements have been made to provide relief for them and the unions are encouraging workers to keep going to the fields" while garment factories continue to operate despite rising numbers of COVID-19 infections.

"I urge workers to attend the SEP meeting in order to understand the only perspective to fight the pandemic," he said.

Mohammad, a 3rd year art student from the University of Colombo, said he would be attending Sunday's meeting because of its international significance.

"We've been in this pandemic for more than a year and a half. No capitalist government wants to stop the pandemic. India faces this catastrophe because the Modi government is determined to maintain India's capitalist economy irrespective of the threat to people's lives. When Modi says, 'India should be saved from a lockdown,' it reveals the murderous attitude of the Indian government towards the people.

"India has a large and militant working class. If it is mobilised on a politically correct line, there is no doubt that it will become a great power. This meeting is a good start for that."

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