New Tamil Nadu state government keeps India's disastrous pandemic policy

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The Tamil-nationalist Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu this month, after the April 6 elections. Even as thousands of Indians die every day of COVID-19, however, it is continuing in all essentials to implement the policies of its defeated Tamil-nationalist rival, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), that have led to impoverishment and mass death.

The DMK of Chief Minister M.K. Stalin was the undeserving beneficiary of mass disillusionment and anger with the outgoing AIADMK and its ally, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Poverty, unemployment, prices for fuel and other essential commodities, and police repression have all surged over the last 10 years of AIADMK rule. During the pandemic, the AIADMK implemented a "herd immunity" policy, allowing the virus to spread virtually unchecked, as workers were kept on the job in nonessential production.

As a result, Tamil Nadu yesterday was the Indian state with the most confirmed infections, 28,798, bringing total cases so far to just under 2 million and total deaths to 22,000. Over 400 people are dying every day in Tamil Nadu, as India overall reported over 171,000 new cases and 3,563 deaths yesterday—the most of any country in the world. It is widely expected, however, that the true numbers of infections and deaths are five to 10 times higher, as most of the sick cannot get care from India's overloaded health system.

In the elections, the AIADMK formed a National Democratic Alliance with eight parties, including the BJP and caste-based parties. The AIADMK emerged as a breakaway faction of the DMK in 1972; the two parties, both longstanding tools of Indian capitalism, have alternated in office ever since the Indian Congress party lost control of the state in 1967.

The DMK for its part formed a Secular Progressive Alliance with 13 parties to exploit growing opposition to the AIADMK and BJP. The coalition included the Stalinist Communist Party (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) and various caste-based parties.

To call the DMK a "secular" party is hypocritical and false, however, as it formed an electoral alliance with the BJP in 1999, assuming three ministerial posts in the central government in 1999. Indeed, what its election victory shows is the bankruptcy of relying on the Stalinist parties, their national ally, the Congress Party, or their various regional and local allies to oppose the violently reactionary policies of the BJP.

The DMK won after spending a massive 10 billion rupees (US$138 million) on its election campaign. It donated Rs S150 million (US$2.1 million) to the CPI, Rs 100 million to the CPI-M, for a total of Rs 400 million (US$5.4 million) in donations to all its coalition partners, according to the DMK's filings with the Election Commission. Reports suggest it may have quietly funneled tens of millions more to the Stalinist parties. The DMK also gave Rs 3.5 billion to the I-PAC (Indian Political Action Committee) to formulate the DMK's electoral strategy.

After this massive election spending, the DMK felt compelled to set up a COVID-19 public relief fund. Stalin said, "As the economy struggles to recover, our government needs to spend more resources to deal with this disaster." Stalin claimed the money will be used for hospital facilities and in order to "fight COVID." Stalin also sought to raise financial assistance from private individuals in Tamil Nadu and in the Tamil diaspora abroad.

This is only a cynical cover, however, for Stalin's

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defense of the wealth of Tamil Nadu's billionaires at the expense of the lives of working and toiling people. DMK leaders such as T.R. Balu, J. Jagathrakshakan, K.N. Nehru, Thuraimurugan, and M.K. Stalin's son Uthayanithi (MLA), sister Kanimozhi (MP), nephew Dayanidhi Maran (MP), and son-in-law Sabrison are worth tens of billions of rupees.

Jagathrakshakan invested vast sums in Sri Lanka, including $3.85 billion in refineries at Hambantota. Stalin's nephew Kalanithi Maran (Dayanidhi Maran's brother) has a net worth of US$2.4 billion. He is the 18th richest man in India. The assets of the 10 wealthiest billionaires in Tamil Nadu alone are worth more than US$50 billion. While the wealth of India's billionaires has nearly doubled over the past year, tens of millions of Indians have lost their livelihoods and fallen into poverty, and hundreds of thousands have died.

Before coming to power, Stalin promised to solve the problems faced by the people at his election campaign meetings within 100 days. He has now thrown these promises into the trash.

While protecting the assets of the billionaires, Stalin declared a lockdown for the month of May but gave only a paltry 2,000 rupees (US$27) to families. This is not enough for a family for three days, let alone a month. This has pushed millions of working people into abject poverty and forced many to remain on the job, risking infection.

Earlier this year, scientists, medical experts and epidemiologists had warned that the spread of coronavirus could wreak havoc in India. These warnings were contemptuously ignored by the BJP government and India's state governments. The Modi government did not take any of the necessary steps to protect the people.

On the contrary, Modi's government held religious events like the Kumbh Mela festival to poison the political atmosphere and assembly elections to consolidate its power in the states. Hindu fanatics gathered last month in the Himalayan town of Haridwar to participate in the Kumbh Mela. Similarly, a DMK-organized election meeting in Trichy was attended by nearly 200,000 people in March, without any form of social distancing. All of these events doubtless massively spread the virus.

As a result, the total toll from COVID-19 in India has risen to 315,235 deaths and 27,369,093 infections. The more infectious and lethal Indian variant of the coronavirus as well as deadly secondary infections of "black fungus" are both spreading rapidly.

In India, more than over 800 million people face a severe shortage of public health and primary care facilities. Across Tamil Nadu, the shortage of hospitals, medical personnel including doctors and paramedics, beds, oxygen, vaccines, medical equipment and ambulances is desperate. In long queues, people are forced to wait for treatment in front of hospitals. crematoriums are overflowing with bodies of the dead who are to be burned. Many have died before receiving treatment.

The DMK government is sacrificing workers to employers and companies in the name of improving the economy. Transnational companies in Oragadam Sriperumbudur in Chennai continued to operate during the lockdown, keeping more than 150,000 workers on the job there. Major companies elsewhere in Tamil Nadu also continue to operate.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has stated: "The pandemic proves the necessity of the abolition of the capitalist nation-state system. To defend its most basic rights, including to health care and to life itself, the working class must break free of the shackles of the trade unions and the Stalinists, which are defenders of capitalism, and establish new independent organizations—rank-and-file committees—through which it can fight to defend its class interests."

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) will hold an online public meeting on "The COVID-19 pandemic and the need for a socialist strategy" on Sunday, May 30, at 6 p.m. Indian Standard Time. The meeting will be conducted in English and Tamil. All WSWS readers are urged to attend.

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