Indian workers need a socialist strategy to combat the Modi government's herd immunity policy

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The following speech was given by Deepal Jayasekera, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), to a May 30 online meeting, "The COVID-19 pandemic and the need for a socialist strategy."

COVID-19 is surging throughout India like a tsunami, ravaging the lives of tens of millions of people. The working class and oppressed masses are bearing the brunt of this horrific crisis. According to official figures, India's total number of coronavirus cases is now over 27 million and deaths over 320,000. Underscoring the ferocity of the pandemic's second wave in India, more than 15 million of these cases have been recorded in just the past eight weeks.

After repeatedly recording the world's highest numbers of daily cases and deaths for a single country, over 400,000 and over 4,000 respectively, India is now reporting over 200,000 daily COVID-19 cases and over 3,000 daily fatalities.

Despite the attempts by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to exploit the relative decline in daily cases and deaths to boast the pandemic is on a "downward trend," the reality is that it continues to rage. One reason for the recent decline in recorded infections is that COVID-19 is now running rampant through India's vast rural population, where testing and health infrastructure are all but non-existent.

Even when the official figures were at their peak, they represented a vast underestimation of the true extent of the catastrophe. India has maintained an extremely low rate of COVID-19 testing throughout the pandemic, ensuring that many cases go undetected. Even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, only a quarter of deaths in India were medically certified. Many medical experts have warned that the real death toll is likely five to ten times the official figure. This would mean that a staggering 20,000 to 40,000 people have been dying every single day since mid-April.

Although the pandemic is a biological phenomenon, the main reasons for the immense and ongoing health and social disaster are political. The threat of a global pandemic was both foreseeable and foreseen, but the capitalist profit system proved utterly incapable of preparing for such a predictable event and of taking the necessary containment measures once it had erupted. Governments in every country, from the imperialist centres of North America and Europe to the right-wing capitalist regimes in India and Pakistan, cut health budgets and starved their health care systems for decades, leaving them in no condition to deal with the surge of sick patients. Then, as the virus began to spread, they prioritised the protection of corporate profits over the safeguarding of human lives. Businesses were allowed to stay open, financial and social support were denied to workers, and millions were allowed to die because, in the words of US President Trump and the *New York Times*, "The cure can't be worse than the disease."

The global capitalist elite's callous indifference to human life finds its sharpest expression in the mass death currently occurring in India. Its dilapidated health care system has been overwhelmed. COVID-19 patients are dying in the streets and in their homes due to the lack of basic medical facilities like oxygen, ICU beds, and ventilators. Thousands of people severely ill with the virus can't even get admitted to a hospital because they are full of patients—sometimes two to a bed. Dead bodies are being thrown en masse into rivers or buried in unmarked graves.

The Modi government was warned as early as February about rising COVID-19 infections and the threat of a catastrophic second wave but chose to do nothing. His BJP, together with the opposition parties, held mass rallies throughout March and most of April for state elections and the government permitted mass religious festivals, like the *Kumbh Mela*, and other events with hundreds of thousands of participants to go ahead. Even as the official daily death toll passed 3,000, Modi adamantly opposed a national lockdown to control the disease, declaring in an "address to the nation" on April 20 that his government's aim was to "save the country from a lockdown" not the Indian people from the pandemic.

In a further obscene demonstration of the Modi government's and Indian ruling class' avarice and indifference to human life, New Delhi is refusing to guarantee free vaccines and vaccinations for all, even though this would cost the government a mere $6.4 billion or 0.32 percent of India's GDP. As a result, hundreds of millions of impoverished Indians, for whom the cost of a single dose is the equivalent of one or more days' wages, will likely never get inoculated.

Under the current lockdowns implemented by various state governments, almost all industries are deemed essential, forcing workers to labour under unsafe conditions and put their lives and those of their loved ones at risk. This has led in recent weeks to scores of worker deaths—most obscured by a corporate-government conspiracy of silence—throughout the country. This includes at least ten workers at the Hyundai Motors plant and five workers at Renault-Nissan's car plant in the Sriperumbur-Oragadam industrial belt located on the outskirts of Chennai. There has also been a wave of deaths in India's other major automaking centre, the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt in the northern state of Haryana. This includes at least five workers at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Gurgaon, two workers at a Honda plant and one worker at the Tata Motors facility.

These deaths, together with those of hundreds of thousands of people across India, are the direct product of policies pursued by the Modi government and the entire Indian ruling elite both during and prior to the emergence of the pandemic. For decades, governments at both central and state levels—including those led by the Congress Party, regional and casteist bourgeois parties like the BSP, the Samajwadi Party, and in Tamil

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Nadu the DMK and AIADMK, and the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—have maintained state spending on health care at the starvation level of 1.5 percent of GDP, leaving hospitals and clinics totally unprepared for COVID-19.

India's devastating second wave—a man-made catastrophe

When the pandemic first emerged in January 2020, the Modi government blithely ignored the impending danger for more than three months. Then, fearing the consequences of its callous class-based indifference towards the lives of the population, Modi made an abrupt about-face, and without planning or warning announced a calamitous nationwide lockdown on March 24, 2020. Modi's ill-prepared lockdown included no more than famine-style relief for the hundreds of millions of workers made jobless overnight. Add to this the government's failure to deploy systematic mass testing and contact tracing, and its steadfast refusal to inject massive resources into the ramshackle health care system, and it is easy to see why the lockdown was a total failure.

The disastrous impact of the BJP's lockdown was shown most graphically by the fate of the migrant workers, who were forced in their millions to return to their distant home villages from India's major cities on foot. Rendered penniless and often homeless by the lockdown, these workers were driven to seek refuge in their villages, and in the process, in many cases, inadvertently brought the COVID-19 virus with them.

At the behest of the corporate and financial elites, the Modi government began as of late April last year to "reopen the economy" and persisted in doing so, although infections and deaths grew in lockstep with the dismantling of COVID-19 restrictions for the next six months. In this, the Hindu supremacist BJP government had the active support of all state governments throughout the country, including those led by the ostensible opposition parties.

It is this "herd immunity" policy—baldly summarized by a medical advisor to Modi who in May 2020 dismissed what he said was the likely deaths of two million Indians as a negligible price to pay for reviving the economy—that paved the way for the current catastrophic wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths.

Along with the health disaster, India's capitalist elite and its political henchmen in the Union and state governments have created a second no less catastrophic pandemic for India's workers and toilers–a pandemic of joblessness, poverty, and hunger. According to a report titled "State of Working India 2021: One Year of COVID-19" prepared by Azim Premji University, during the past year a further 230 million Indians have been pushed below a subsistence level poverty-line of 375 rupees or US $5 per day. During the same time, India's billionaires have nearly doubled their wealth to US $596 billion thanks to the government's homicidal open economy policy and the funneling by governments and central banks around the world of trillions of dollars into propping up the financial markets and investor wealth.

The working class and the fight for a science-based response to the pandemic

The working class and oppressed masses of India, like their class brothers and sisters around the world, will not silently accept the social murder carried out by the ruling elite and its assaults on their jobs, wages and working and living conditions. Over the past 18 months, Indian workers have mounted numerous strikes and protests. These include two nationwide general strikes on January 8 and November 26 last year, and numerous militant actions by workers in myriad sectors from coal mining, the auto industry and public transport, to health care, banks and insurance. These strikes and protests have challenged the Modi government's privatization drive, austerity measures, and other pro-investors policies. A seven-month-long protest by hundreds of thousands of farmers against the BJP's pro-agribusiness farm laws staggered the Modi government and forced it to temporarily delay their implementation.

In a significant development—which underscores the role the working class can and must play in imposing a scientific response to the pandemic that prioritizes life over profit—autoworkers at a Hyundai complex in Tamil Nadu staged a sit-down strike this week to denounce the lack of COVID-19 protections. As a result, the Korean-owned automaker had to temporarily suspend operations. The threat of a similar strike at a nearby Renault-Nissan forced that multinational automaker to follow suit.

The Modi government has responded to the growth of popular opposition by unleashing repressive measures, whipping up communalism to weaken and divide the working class and intensifying its plans for dictatorial forms of rule.

Challenging the "herd immunity" policies of the Modi government and the Indian ruling elite, we in the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insist that the lives of workers and the rural poor must be prioritized over the profits of big business. Based on that overriding principle, we advance the following demands to fight the deadly pandemic:

* A lockdown must be implemented with the shutdown of all non-essential services. Full wages must be paid to all workers, including those employed in the informal sector, the millions of migrant workers, the self-employed, small business owners, poor farmers and fishermen.

* Those workers in essential services, like health care, electricity, telecommunications, and food production, must be given the very best personal protective equipment and medical care if they become infected.

* No cuts in jobs, wages and other benefits for workers.

* Free vaccines for all.

* Massive financial resources must be allocated to upgrading the public health care system to combat the pandemic and all the other health issues Indian working people confront due to poverty, squalor and malnutrition.

For the independent political intervention of the working class

The parties of the political establishment, the bourgeois media, the Stalinists and trade union officials will all cry in unison that there is "No money" to implement such a programme. We say there are more than enough financial resources, but they are monopolized by India's venal capitalist elite. The immense wealth accumulated by the corporate billionaires and financial moguls must be confiscated and redeployed to meet social needs. This can only be achieved through the independent political intervention of the working class fighting for its own interests.

Like their counterparts around the world, the Indian Stalinists and their unions are working tirelessly to block any such mobilization of working class power. They have doubled down on their treacherous efforts to politically subordinate the working class to the parties of the bourgeois establishment, the Congress Party, till recently the ruling class' preferred party of national government and various right-wing ethno-regional and caste-based parties.

Indian workers must organizationally and politically break from the Stalinists and their unions. They must form independent rank-and-file committees to fight for their health and workplace safety, and for basic

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rights like jobs, wages and decent working and living conditions. These committees must also take the lead in rallying the oppressed rural masses, above all the hundreds of millions of agricultural workers and marginal farmers, by advancing a socialist programme to defend them against the deprivations of capitalism.

Through these committees, Indian workers must fight to unify their struggles with their class brothers and sisters across South Asia, including in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, and in the imperialist centres of North America and Europe. To this end, they should support the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which was established by the ICFI at its recent May Day rally to provide workers with a new channel to coordinate and unify their struggles on a worldwide basis.

As the pandemic is a global crisis, born of a virus that recognizes no borders, it cannot be eradicated in any single country. At every point, the national antagonisms engendered by global capitalism and expressed in the bitter inter-state rivalries between the major powers have thrown up barriers to fighting the pandemic. The determination of the governments of every country to rapidly lift all pandemic restrictions has been driven to a large degree by the fear of losing ground to their rivals in the global struggle for investment, markets, and raw materials. Central to Modi's plans to revive India's pandemic-battered economy is his pitch to American, European and Japanese imperialism that India can serve as an alternative cheap-labour production-chain hub to China. This is the economic component of the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to bolster its great-power ambitions by integrating India ever more fully into Washington's incendiary military-strategic offensive against China.

The eruption of vaccine nationalism provides yet another example of capitalism's utter incapacity to organise a science-based global response to the pandemic. India, the world's principal producer of low-cost vaccines, has banned the export of all COVID vaccines at least until the end of the year, denying hundreds of millions of people in less-developed countries in Africa and Asia access to vaccines. The United States has likewise banned the export of vaccines and the raw materials needed to produce them, helping derail vaccine production in India. For Washington, anti-COVID vaccines are weapons to be used in pursuit of its predatory geopolitical and diplomatic interests, not a means to save human lives.

All of this speaks to the irrationality and failure of capitalism. The idea the pandemic can be defeated by vaccinating everyone in a single country while denying the vast majority of the world access to COVID-19 vaccinations is illusory, since the continued spread of the virus will facilitate the emergence of new, more aggressive variants, including potentially vaccine-resistant strains.

As the ICFI and *World Socialist Web Site* have insisted from the beginning of the pandemic—including in a February 26, 2020 statement titled "For a globally coordinated emergency response to the coronavirus pandemic"—the world's medical, financial, material, and logistical resources must be mobilized in a coordinated, science-based global effort to suppress the virus.

The only social force capable of leading the fight for such a programme is the international working class, which is not bound to any nation-state and private property. Working people in every country must take the lead in mobilizing the world's resources to fight the pandemic. The political perspective required to guide this struggle is socialist internationalism.

In conclusion, we call upon Indian workers to join with their class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally in a united movement against world capitalism and for international socialism. This will be a struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally. To establish the necessary revolutionary leadership for the Indian working class, a section of the ICFI must be built in India. The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), in close political collaboration with the ICFI and all its sections, will offer Indian workers and socialist-minded youth and professionals every assistance in this vital endeavour.

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