

Remarks to SEP (Sri Lanka) meeting on the pandemic in India

What capitalism has wrought—India's tsunami of infections and death, and pandemic of hunger and joblessness

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The following speech was delivered by Keith Jones, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), to an online meeting organized by the SEP (Sri Lanka), "The COVID-19 pandemic and the need for a socialist strategy." The meeting, directed to workers and youth in Sri Lanka, India and throughout South Asia, was held on May 30.

Little more than a few weeks ago, Narendra Modi, the Hindu supremacist thug who serves as India's prime minister, was claiming that India had shown the world how to defeat COVID-19.

These ignorant remarks—along with his subsequent vow, made on April 20 amidst an exponential rise in COVID-19 infections and deaths, that his government would "save India from lockdown," not the virus—will be inscribed on Modi's political tombstone.

The catastrophe now engulfing India beggars description. As other speakers have explained, India is being ravaged by two pandemics, both of which are the product of the bourgeoisie's ruthless pursuit of its selfish class interests—a pandemic of infection and death by asphyxiation, and a pandemic of joblessness, wage cuts and hunger.

It is a fool's game to try to rank which capitalist ruling elite's response to the pandemic has been the most calamitous. Around the world, and most notably in imperialist Europe and North America, capitalist governments, whether avowedly right-wing or ostensibly left, have let the virus run rampant to protect big business profits and investor wealth.

The pandemic is a world health and social crisis for which the only answer is a global, science-based mobilization of resources to protect lives and working people's livelihoods. But everywhere this imperative is in irreconcilable conflict with global capitalism; comes up against the reality that the most basic and essential human needs are subordinated to the pursuit of capitalist profit and the struggle among the rival, nationally-based capitalist cliques for resources, markets and geostrategic advantage.

That said, the pandemic, and especially the horrors of the past 10 weeks, have enabled the entire world to see what was already apparent to hundreds of millions of Indian workers and toilers: India's purported capitalist rise—so celebrated in the media in the west—has produced a malignant society that embodies and exemplifies the dysfunction, brutality, and criminality of 21st century capitalism.

South Asia remains deformed by the legacy of British colonial rule and subject to continuing imperialist oppression. Yet India is not a country without considerable human and material resources, industrial capacity and, in certain sectors, highly advanced technology. But these are monopolized by a tiny stratum of capitalist oligarchs and their state apparatus, and are deployed not to meet crying social needs, but to systematically increase the extraction of surplus value—profit—from the labour of the working class and rural toilers.

Thus India's public health care system, notwithstanding the self-sacrifice of health workers, is a shambles and a sham.

While India's billionaires have seen their fortunes almost double during the pandemic to almost \$600 billion, the Modi government cannot find the resources to devote a miniscule 0.37 percent of GDP to provide free vaccinations to the Indian people.

Demonstrating that the Indian elite's priorities lie in pursuing its predatory great-power ambitions on the world stage and strengthening the repressive state machine that upholds its rule and wealth at home, the Modi government has proven able to fully inoculate more than 90 percent of India's armed forces against COVID 19, but just 3 percent of the population.

The current crisis has laid bare what three decades of India's so-called new economic policy has wrought. Thirty years ago, in July, 1991, the Indian bourgeoisie repudiated its post-independence state-led development project—a nationalist strategy based on import substitution that it cynically labelled socialism—and initiated India's full integration into the US-led world capitalist order.

Ever since, all national and state governments, including those supported or led by the Stalinist CPM and CPI, have relentlessly pushed forward with what are euphemistically called pro-investor policies—privatization, deregulation, the elimination of price subsidies, massive tax cuts for big business and the rich, and the prioritizing of capitalist development projects over social infrastructure.

This has gone hand in hand with an ever more pronounced orientation to Washington, codified, since 2006, in a global Indo-US strategic partnership and an ever expanding web of military ties.

Over the past three decades, the Indian bourgeoisie has gorged on the ruthless exploitation of India's workers and toilers. They and their partners and patrons, the transnational corporations and the global investment firms, have appropriated the lion's share of the wealth created by India's capitalist expansion as epitomized by the exponential growth of India's billionaires, from two in the mid-1990s to 140 or more today. This is in a country where hundreds of millions struggle to survive on less than 180 rupees, or US \$2.50 per day, and more than one in three children is malnourished. Social inequality in India now rivals, if not surpasses, that at the height of the British Raj, with the richest 1 percent of Indians owning four times the wealth of the poorest 70 percent of the population.

The same Indian corporate media that fawns over the Ambanis, Adanis, Tatas and other billionaires trumpets India's supposed increased stature in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and Tokyo. The reality is, India is evermore a US crony and satrap—aiding and abetting American imperialism in its war drive against China, and through acts of omissions

and commission, conniving in the US attempt to economically strangle Iran and the imperialist subjugation of the Palestinian people.

Indian military-security experts now boast about India reprising the role it played for a century under the British Raj, when, to use their words, India was a “net security provider” in the Indo-Pacific region. That is, it supplied troops and cannon fodder for British imperialism’s global operations from the conquest of Burma and the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in China to the two world wars of the last century.

Indian workers must beware. Just as the Indian ruling class has presided over untold death during the ongoing pandemic, so the military-security alliance it has forged with US imperialism in pursuit of its own great-power ambitions threatens to produce a catastrophe of incalculable proportions for the people of South Asia and the world. Indian capitalism’s reactionary strategic conflicts with China and Pakistan have become inextricably enmeshed with the ever more explosive US-China conflict. Last year’s border conflict with China, in which Washington egged New Delhi on, was India’s fourth war crisis with its two nuclear-armed neighbours since 2016.

In response to the intensification of the global capitalist crisis produced by the pandemic, the Indian bourgeoisie is doubling down on the reactionary class strategy it has pursued since 1991.

The Modi government’s herd immunity/open economy policy is the cutting edge of an intensification of class war. As Modi dismantled the anti-COVID-19 measures last May, he announced what he termed “a quantum jump” in pro-investor reforms. Virtually all remaining public sector units or enterprises are being privatized. In September, the BJP government rammed through three pro-agribusiness laws and amended the labour code to further entrench precarious contract labour employment and illegalize most worker job action.

So too, the Modi government, with corporate India’s enthusiastic support, has integrated India still more fully into the US economic and strategic offensive against China. In the past 12 months it has dramatically expanded a vast web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-strategic ties with Washington and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. These include the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a quasi-military alliance, that Biden hastened to raise to a new level within weeks of becoming president by convening the first-ever heads of government Quad summit.

Underscoring the aggressive mindset of the Indian ruling class and the ever swelling size of its reckless wager on propping up American imperialist global hegemony, the Modi government has placed the expansion of India’s military-industrial sector and its emergence as a cheap-labour subcontractor for the US armaments industry at the centre of its “Make in India” industrial strategy.

The past three decades, however, have given rise to more than just a rapacious Indian capitalism. They have also vastly increased the size and social power of the Indian working class, and through the process of integrated global production, enormously reinforced its objective unity with workers around the world, including in the advanced capitalist countries.

Like the Russian working class at the beginning of the last century, the rapidly expanding Indian working class has shown great combativity and militancy. But its struggles have been systematically isolated and suppressed, and it has been politically disenfranchised.

For this the various Stalinist parties and their affiliated unions are principally responsible. For decades the CPM and CPI and their Left Front have functioned as an integral part of the capitalist political establishment. When the Indian ruling class’s state-led development strategy shipwrecked in 1991, the CPM and CPI propped up the Narasimha Rao Congress Party government that initiated neo-liberal reform. And for the next two decades, they supported and helped cobble together a succession of coalition governments, most of them Congress Party-led, that

spearheaded the drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capital and pursued ever-closer ties to Washington. Moreover, whenever and wherever they have led state governments the Stalinists have implemented what they themselves term pro-investor policies.

For the past 30 years, the CPM and CPI have lionized the Congress, the historic party of the Indian bourgeoisie, and a host of right-wing regional ethno-chauvinist and casteist parties as secular and democratic bulwarks against the BJP, whom the working class must support so as to defeat the Hindu supremacist right.

To be sure, Modi and the RSS Sangh Parivar are the deadliest enemies of the working class. But in implementing pro-market reform and championing the Indo-US alliance, Modi and his BJP are only continuing down the path blazed by the Stalinist-supported Congress-led governments that preceded it.

The growth of communal reaction and the bourgeoisie’s embrace of the would be Hindu-authoritarian strongman Modi, speak to the acute crisis of Indian capitalism and underscore the urgency of the independent political mobilization of the working class, rallying the rural toilers behind it, in the fight for workers’ power against the bourgeoisie and all its political representatives.

It is precisely because the working class has been politically paralyzed by the Stalinist parties and trade unions and prevented from advancing its own socialist solution to endemic poverty, acute economic insecurity and ever-widening social inequality, that the BJP has been able to exploit mounting popular social anger and frustration to become India’s most powerful political party.

Democratic rights cannot be defended by clutching at the putrefying parties of the supposed democratic wing of the ruling class—parties like the Congress, which for decades have connived with the Hindu right and imposed vicious anti-working class policies—but only through the mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism and its emergence thereby as the defender and leader of all the oppressed.

This requires building new organizations of class struggle. Rank-and-file workplace committees are an essential weapon for workers to assert their class interests and break out of the straitjacket in which the trade unions have constrained and thwarted their struggles.

The foremost task is the building of a revolutionary party of the working class: an Indian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International based on the socialist internationalist strategy of permanent revolution. The program of permanent revolution animated the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and the subsequent struggle led by its co-leader, Leon Trotsky, against the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, which usurped power from the working class, betrayed the revolutionary strivings of workers around the world in the name of the reactionary nationalist credo of “socialism in one country” and ultimately, as Trotsky warned, restored capitalism. None of the burning problems facing the Indian masses, from the fight against the pandemic, social inequality and the threat of war, to the eradication of caste oppression and the defeat of communal reaction, can be addressed outside of the struggle against Indian and world capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of global socioeconomic life.

I urge all those participating in today’s online event to take up the fight for socialism by placing themselves under the emancipatory banner of the Fourth International.



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