

Unify the working class across the Indian subcontinent to fight the COVID-19 pandemic!

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It is my pleasure to bring the fraternal greetings of the Socialist Equality Party of France to this important international meeting.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a world event. Only a globally coordinated, scientific health strategy can defeat this highly contagious virus, which ignores borders and passports and infects people of all nationalities. The events of the last year have made clear that averting mass deaths requires the unification and mobilization of the working class internationally.

Around the world, the capitalist ruling elites have demonstrated their blatant indifference to the lives of working people during this pandemic.

Over 1 million people have died of COVID-19 in Europe, as governments refused to take public health measures demanded by doctors and scientists. French President Emmanuel Macron declared that the people need to “learn to live with the virus.” Dominic Cummings, the former chief adviser to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, recently revealed that the British government has planned for 800,000 people to die of COVID-19 in Britain.

Workers in Europe and internationally increasingly know that the horrific tragedy in India is a threat to their own lives. They are shocked by videos of Indians standing in long queues to cremate the bodies of their loved ones who died of COVID-19, or corpses floating in the Ganges or being eaten by dogs. Moreover, the B.1.617 variant first detected in India has now been officially registered in 53 regions worldwide, including much of Europe.

Around the world, the ruling elites claimed there was no money for social distancing policies, while plundering the public treasury. The European Union spent €2 trillion on bailouts for banks and big businesses, while insisting

workers had to remain at work in non-essential jobs, and children had to remain at school.

The Indian ruling class imposed the same essential policy of social murder under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It claimed there was no money for social distancing policies to halt the circulation of the virus, or to improve India’s basic health infrastructure. At the same time, it allocated US\$2.8 billion to build a new parliament building and Prime Minister’s residence, and US\$71.1 billion for military spending.

At the level of the world economy, however, the technological, scientific and industrial tools to stop the coronavirus exist.

Only a conscious, united international movement of the working class against capitalism can seize these resources and use them to save lives, not make profits for the super-rich. Building such a movement requires a conscious struggle to unify workers across all the national, religious, ethnic, and caste lines that the ruling class uses to divide them.

At every step, the struggle to unite the workers conflicts with the bankrupt nation-state system that emerged from the 1947 Partition of India, and the abortion of the revolutionary struggle of the workers and peasants of the Indian subcontinent against British imperialism.

The pandemic has exposed the social conditions that have emerged from the division of the workers between India and Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim, and among different ethnicities and castes. Nearly 20 percent of urban Indians do not have access to water and detergent at home. Of India’s 1.3 billion people, about 160 million do not have access to clean water—more than Russia’s entire population. There are desperate shortages of everything from hospital beds and respirators to vaccines, in India and across all of South Asia.

The experiences of these fragmented countries vindicate the Trotskyist perspective of Permanent Revolution. Leon Trotsky's warning 80 years ago about the class character of the Indian bourgeoisie applies with redoubled force today. He said:

“The Indian bourgeoisie is incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle. They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromise with British imperialism no matter what the price, and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. The leader and prophet of this bourgeoisie is Gandhi. A fake leader and a false prophet!”

The pandemic is a terrible confirmation of the words of this great Marxist. Workers cannot stop the policy of social murder by appealing to Modi's rivals in the Indian political establishment. The Congress Party and its allies among the Stalinist, regionalist and casteist parties, and the union bureaucracy all actively support or implement the same essential policy.

The clearest example is the new government formed in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu by the Tamil nationalist allies of the Congress, led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). They won last month's elections by exploiting opposition to Modi and his allies.

Yet the DMK, the Congress, the Stalinist CPI and CPM, and the casteist Viduthalai Siruthikal Katchi are continuing Modi's policy of social murder on the pandemic. While claiming they are organizing a lockdown, they are handing out only starvation wages to families who are supposed to stay home. At the same time, they are keeping millions of workers on the job in non-essential production. This ensures that countless thousands more will die.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, above all the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, are fighting to orient the Indian working class to the perspective of world socialist revolution.

The SEP in Sri Lanka continues the struggle for Trotskyism and to unite the workers across all lines of race, religion, language and caste in a struggle for socialism.

It continues what is best in the traditions of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Sri Lanka. Amid mounting

struggles against British rule, the LSSP took seriously Leon Trotsky's call to the Indian working class. They expelled Stalinists from their party. They declared that the revolutionary socialist movement of the island could only be built as an integral part of an international revolutionary movement across India. They fought to build the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India.

The SEP emerged from those who opposed the LSSP's Great Betrayal of Trotskyism: its capitulation to Sinhala chauvinism and its entry into the capitalist government of Madam Sirinavo Bandaranaike in 1964. It fought both the Sinhala-racist constitution subsequently adopted by the Sri Lankan state and Tamil nationalists' attempts to divide the working class along ethnic lines.

The SEP implacably opposed the 26-year communal war waged by the Sri Lankan state against the Tamil people and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. At the same time, it made no concessions to Tamil nationalism. It fought to win Tamil workers to the perspective of a united struggle with their Sinhala and Muslim class brothers and sisters against capitalism.

We are gathered today shortly after the 12th anniversary of the Mullivaikkal massacre of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and LTTE fighters that ended the Sri Lankan war, on May 18, 2009.

This massacre, one of the great war crimes of the 21st century, had the tacit support of the Indian Congress Party government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Indeed, WikiLeaks cables show Indian officials reassured US diplomats that the Indian political establishment would not oppose the massacre of the LTTE that was being planned.

Today, the global disaster of the COVID-19 pandemic raises with unprecedented urgency the necessity of the international unification of the working class. In this, the fight to unify workers of all different ethnicities in India, in Sri Lanka and across the Indian subcontinent will play a central role. At its heart will be the struggle to build the Trotskyist movement, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, in India. Thank you.



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