With more than 20,000 daily infections, Kerala emerges as India's COVID-19 epicenter

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The south Indian state of Kerala, which is governed by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), has become the new epicenter of the country's COVID-19 catastrophe. Since late July, Kerala has experienced a high and growing number of COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations, fueled by the deadly Delta variant.

For weeks Kerala has recorded around half or more of all India's new COVID-19 infections, and on some days this week Kerala accounted for 70 percent of new cases nationwide. Yet the state's population of 35.8 million represents just 2.75 percent of India's 1.39 billion inhabitants.

On Friday, the state's total COVID-19 cases since the pandemic began reached 4.12 million, with 32,097 infections reported in the preceding 24 hours. According to the extremely under-reported official figures, Kerala's death toll rose to 21,149, with 188 fatalities since the previous day.

Between August 23 and Thursday, September 2—that is an eleven-day period—Kerala recorded 355,560 new infections and the seven-day average of daily new cases rose from 17,896 to 29,804. Kerala's test positivity rate, meanwhile, has risen to an astronomic 20 percent.

Dr. Samiran Panda, head of epidemiology and communicable diseases at the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), said that the increase in cases in Kerala "is an early warning signal." Pointing to the pattern in the state over the last three months—a drop in cases, followed by a temporary lull and then a surge—he warned that the third wave of the pandemic has begun in Kerala.

If Kerala is now leading India into a third wave of COVID-19 infections, it is because the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM-led state administration has joined the Narendra Modi-led central government in prioritizing corporate profits over saving lives. The Kerala government exempted export industries from the state-wide lockdown it imposed in April and May at the height of the second wave, then when infections began to decline moved to quickly roll back any pandemic mitigation measures. This even included allowing mass Muslim and Hindu religious festivals to proceed unimpeded in late July and mid-August, a decision that was widely decried by health experts across the country and which has undoubtedly contributed to the current surge in infections.

In response to the current surge of the virus, the state government has belatedly imposed weekend curfews and, as of last Monday, a night curfew—measures which will neither affect the profit generation of big business nor bring the pandemic under control.

Kerala's devastating second and third waves of COVID-19 infection and death constitute tragic refutation of the CPM's and LDF's claims that they have shielded the state from the worst of the pandemic. This narrative was promoted, at least until recently, by internationally influential corporate media voices, including the BBC, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Guardian*, and pseudo-left websites like Jacobin in the US. The UK's *Prospect Magazine* named former Kerala Health Minister KK Shailaja as the "top thinker" of the COVID-19 age in September 2020, while the *Financial Times* called her one of the "inspiring women of 2020."

In reality, Kerala's Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM-led administration has pursued essentially the same ruinous, ruling-class driven pandemic policy as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and India's other state governments.

Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were quick to embrace the homicidal approach associated with the phrase "herd immunity," with a top government advisor openly declaring in May 2020 that the economy should be reopened because this would result in "only" 2 million deaths. As India's deadly April-May 2021 second pandemic wave peaked, hospitals turned away patients in droves for want of beds, drugs and trained personnel and India officially reported thousands of new COVID-19 deaths each day, Modi infamously declared that it was necessary to "save India from lockdown," not the virus.

As a result, India has suffered a catastrophic loss of life. While officially India has recorded 440,000 COVID deaths, a series of studies have placed the real figure at five to ten times higher. According to a comprehensive study by the US-based Center for Global Development, based on multiple data sets, between April 2020 and June 2021 there were between 3.4 million and 4.7 million "excess," i.e., COVID-19-related, deaths.

A review of the Kerala LDF government's response to the pandemic demonstrates that the longer the pandemic has continued the more indistinguishable its policies have become from those of the Modi regime.

Like India's entire ruling elite, the LDF government blithely disregarded the warnings coming from the World Health Organization and other scientific experts in the first months of 2020 about the global threat posed by COVID-19. On February 14, 2020, after Kerala's first three COVID-19 patients were declared recovered, the Stalinist government's then finance minister, Thomas Isaac, tweeted: "Kerala has won the battle with Corona Virus (sic)." On March 29, 2020, Kerala Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Pinarayi Vijayan wrote in the party's English weekly *Peoples Democracy*:

"This pandemic has brought many developed countries to a standstill. Kerala is giving a tough fight, to curtail the spread of this virus. The LDF Government of Kerala is leading this fight right from the forefront."

All these premature boasts and lies have now been exposed. In fact, from the beginning, the Kerala Stalinist government, together with the entire political establishment, systematically downplayed the virus danger and projected an air of normalcy to justify keeping the "economy open."

On March 24, 2020, the BJP government imposed a calamitous ill-prepared lockdown with only a few hours' notice. It failed to halt the spread of the virus because it was not accompanied by elementary public health measures and social support for the hundreds of millions who lost their livelihoods overnight. In response to demands from big business, the government started easing the restrictions from the end of April, leading to an exponential growth of COVID-19 cases and deaths. The return to work triggered a sharp rise in infections, with the number of confirmed cases rising by almost 500,000 in June, 1.1 million in July, and just shy of 2 million in August. This resulted in a long wave of infections and death through last summer and fall, and then to a far more devastating second wave, fueled by new variants, that began in mid-February in 2021.

In comparison with the central government and most other Indian states, the Kerala government mounted a larger public health response and took stricter anti-COVID-19 measures during the pandemic's first wave, and this did have a material impact. Infections and deaths were kept relatively low, and this in a state that had to cope with a large number of infected migrant workers expelled from the Middle East. However, the Stalinist government's moves in line with Modi to gradually ease those restrictions resulted in the virus's resurgence in Kerala.

Echoing Modi, Kerala Chief Minister Vijayan told a July 24, 2020 press conference: "In the all-party meeting held to discuss the COVID-19 situation, a majority of the members had also opined against total lockdown. So at present there is no need to impose total lockdown."

Less than two weeks later, the state government issued an order withdrawing and watering down COVID-19 restrictions. The new order allowed for the resumption of long-distance KSRTC (Kerala State Transport) bus services, and for shops, markets, banks, offices, financial institutions, factories, industrial establishments, and opened tourist spaces to function normally from Monday to Saturday. Establishments in the public sector, including government offices, Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), companies, autonomous organisations, and commissions were allowed to function as usual from Monday to Friday.

When Modi proclaimed the fourth phase in his "unlockdown" in September 2020, the Stalinist state government, ignoring all warnings of health experts, followed suit by adopting further relaxations. This included greenlighting in-house dining in hotels and restaurants across the state, and allowing government offices, including PSUs, to operate with 100 percent attendance. These unscientific relaxations led to a resurgence of mass infections and a sharp rise in deaths.

On September 29, 2020, due to an alarming rise in COVID-19 infections in Kerala, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) wrote a warning letter to the state government. It demanded the declaration of a "health emergency" in the state, which "would help the public grasp the gravity of the situation and ensure that they practice more caution" and "also help implement stricter restrictions to curb contact transmission and start preparatory measures to expand infrastructure to handle more cases."

Flouting these warnings, Vijayan arrogantly told reporters the same day, "Everyone is aware how critical the situation is. Yet, the government doesn't want to go toward a complete shutdown." During October-November 2020, the Kerala government opened all tourist destinations, like hill stations, adventure and blackwater tourism spots, and beaches.

When India was ravaged by a tsunami of coronavirus infections in the second wave, Veena George, health minister in the LDF government, said, "We cannot be in an indefinite lockdown. Kerala has been implementing measures foreseeing these things." As the virus raged across the country, leading to the collapse of hospitals, the Kerala Stalinists allowed factories and industrial sites in the state to function with 50 percent attendance.

On July 18, 2021, the IMA termed the decision of Kerala to ease restrictions ahead of various religious festivals as "retrograde." The organisation cautioned that a third wave of the pandemic may be inevitable if appropriate steps were not taken. "The rise in cases is owing to flaws in government policies. They are allowing mass gatherings, conducting offline physical examinations, and [limited] lockdowns are being done [only] on alternate days," said IMA President Dr. J. A Jayalal.

The fact that Kerala's LDF government has implemented essentially the same criminal pandemic policy as Modi and his BJP underscores that the Stalinists serve the same big business masters. For the past three decades, the CPM and its close ally, the Communist Party of India (CPI), have played a pivotal role in the Indian ruling elite's drive to transform India into a cheap labour platform for global investors, implementing what they themselves have termed "pro-investor" policies. They have responded to the mass struggles that have erupted against Modi, fueled by his government's criminal handling of the pandemic and drive to make the masses pay for its economic fallout through intensified exploitation, by redoubling their efforts to tie India's workers and toilers to the Congress Party and various caste-ist and regionalist parties, with a view to replacing Modi and his BJP with an alternate right-wing government after the 2024 elections.

The struggle to bring the pandemic under control though the implementation of a science-based policy that puts saving lives before capitalist profit, like the struggle against the BJP's austerity measures, privatization drive and anti-worker labour "reform," requires the independent political mobilization of the working class on a socialist-internationalist program.

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