

West Bengal adopts mass infection policy amid India's COVID-19 surge

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21 January 2022

The social disaster unleashed on India by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reckless policies amid the latest surge of the COVID-19 pandemic implicates the entire political establishment. The opposition Congress, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of rule, the two Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and Communist Party of India (CPI)—and various regionalist parties are no alternative to Modi. They all implement the same policies as Modi's central government in the states where they are in power.

In the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is carrying out “herd immunity” policies on the pandemic, just like Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). As a result, COVID-19 is surging across West Bengal. On January 9, it reported 24,287 new cases, the highest since the pandemic began. During the devastating second wave last year, the highest number of cases officially recorded was 20,846 on May 14.

Active cases in the state now number over 158,000. The state capital, Kolkata, has over 30,000 active cases, breaking the previous record. The total number of confirmed deaths in the state has exceeded 20,000 now with over 1.9 million total cases. On January 19, the state recorded 11,447 new cases, over 1,000 more than the previous day, reporting a seven-day average of 15,911.

All these numbers are official figures. It is known that both central and state governments deliberately and massively undercount the real number of deaths so they can keep arguing to keep all businesses and industries to continue to function and make profits despite the pandemic.

Health care workers, who have been forced to work

without adequate protection from the virus, are among the most vulnerable sections of society. According to the West Bengal health officials, more than 1,000 health care workers, including doctors and nurses, were tested positive in Kolkata city alone.

On January 8, a doctor was found infected while on duty in the emergency department of Bishwanathpur hospital in Deganga, North 24 Pargana district. When confronted by an angry patient and his relative, he revealed to their shock and surprise that most doctors in the hospital were infected with COVID-19.

On January 8, Ekalabya Chakraborty, a public relations official for the India railways, told the media that in the Howrah, Sealdha, Asansol, and Malda divisions of West Bengal, more than 1,000 workers were found to be COVID-positive, including local and express train drivers, ticket collectors, guards and higher officials.

On vaccinations against coronavirus, West Bengal still lags far behind. Little more than 80 percent of the people have had their first jab, and just over 60 percent received two. This means about 40 percent of the state's population is totally unprotected. Moreover, against the more contagious and vaccine-resistant Omicron variant, even two doses are inadequate.

The increasingly dangerous pandemic situation in this state is replicated by the very rapid surge unfolding across India as a whole. Medical experts are warning that a third wave in the country is expected to arrive at the end of this month with 400,000 to 800,000 infections each day.

On January 3, after the Christmas and New Year festivals, the TMC government announced a partial lockdown and night curfew. Schools and colleges were closed for a fortnight, the last local train departure was announced for 7:00 p.m., later revised to 10:00 p.m.

There were certain restrictions on domestic flights from Delhi and Mumbai for two days per week, the latter was revised to three days. These very limited actions will not control COVID-19, particularly the Omicron variant.

Amid the COVID-19 surge in West Bengal and throughout India, the TMC government authorized the Gangasagar Mela (a Hindu religious festival) on January 14 and the International Kolkata Book Fair on January 31, which has now been postponed to February 28. These events would bring hundreds of thousands of people together to be exposed to the deadly virus, leading to further surge of the virus. An estimated 2.4 million people will participate in these events.

Another event that would bring together millions of people is the polls announced for 111 civic bodies in two phases, on February 12 and February 27.

Dr. Hiralal Konar, one of the convenors of the Joint Platform of the Doctors in West Bengal, told the media: “We appeal to the government to stop the Gangasagar Mela and Municipality vote as they are superspreader events.”

Regarding Gangasagar Mela, the Kolkata high court initially raised concerns about permitting the fair amid a rapid spread of COVID-19 cases. But the court changed its position in a January 7 ruling. It finally gave a green light to the religious festival with some conditions, chiefly to set up a three-member committee to monitor the situation. However, this committee does not include a single member of the health department.

The judiciary’s ruling is in fact in line with the entire Indian ruling elite’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis. All are in favor of allowing and implementing the criminal and disastrous “herd immunity” policy of allowing the virus to spread, prioritizing profit over human lives.

In a revelation of backwardness and idiocy, the West Bengal advocate general told the Kolkata high court that coronavirus does not spread in salty water. Ridiculing this stupid assertion, Koushik Chaki, the founder of the West Bengal doctor forum, said: “If so, then all should be taken to sit in Digha, Mondarmani (seashore area). France is situated beside the sea; why then is COVID spreading there?”

The opposition parties in West Bengal have criticized the ruling TMC’s decision to allow the festivals and polls to go ahead only for opportunist political gains.

They were holding mass election rallies in five poll-bound states, including the most populous Uttar Pradesh until the Election Commission banned them from the beginning of the year.

Last year in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand, the biggest Hindu religious festival, Haridwar Kumbh Mela, was held in April, with the participation of 12 million people from across the country. This turned out to be the main superspreader for India’s disastrous second wave. The festival was allowed to proceed partly as part of BJP’s Hindu communal politics and chiefly to pursue a “herd immunity” policy that cost millions of lives.

Similarly, the TMC government’s granting of permission for Gangasagar Mela also aims to appeal to Hindu sentiment and pursue a “herd immunity” policy.

Dr. Kunal Sarkar, a renowned heart specialist in Kolkata, criticized the TMC government’s handling of the pandemic, telling the Bengali daily *Anandbazar Patrika*: “We are looking for the vote bank, not the life bank, looking for votes, not for voters. Now lives have become percentages, we are treated as if we don’t have value.” He continued, “We will suffer if the government is not sensitive, the wave would come. ... [t]here is the possibility of one hundred thousand infections becoming a million.”



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