Modi blames losses from COVID-19 lockdown on Indian opposition parties

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In a futile attempt to wash responsibility for millions of COVID-19 deaths from his hands, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday in parliament blamed opposition parties for spreading COVID-19 to rural areas.

Modi attacked the Congress Party in particular for committing a "*Paap*" (sin) by "instigat[ing] migrants to defy Covid lockdown." He blamed Congress for giving "free train tickets to migrant workers to leave Mumbai," after the national coronavirus lockdown announced by Modi on March 24, 2020. Mumbai, India's financial capital, is located in the state of Maharashtra, ruled by the fascistic Shiv Sena-led alliance in which the Congress is a partner.

Modi also attacked the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which rules the National Capital Territory of Delhi, for having "provided them [migrants] with buses" to leave Delhi. "As a result," Modi said, "Covid spread rapidly in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand."

While COVID-19 clearly spread to rural India when migrant workers from the cities returned to their villages, Modi's statements are drenched in hypocrisy. In response to mass public concern and anger at the pandemic in March 2020, Modi suddenly announced a month-long, countrywide lockdown. He announced it, however, with only four hours' notice, with the same complete contempt for the well-being of India's workers and rural toilers that led him to keep workers at work during the Delta variant wave last year that claimed millions of lives.

In March 2020, however, the entire Indian ruling elite led by Modi abandoned workers to their fate as they made dangerous trips home. Neither Modi's Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), nor Congress nor the AAP provided social support—wage support during the lockdown, or distributing food and medical supplies—that would have allowed workers to remain safely in the cities.

The BJP, Congress, the AAP and India's other bourgeois parties bear political responsibility for the criminal policies that were implemented and the mass death that followed.

Maharashtra and then Delhi became epicentres of India's COVID-19 pandemic. Delhi saw horrible scenes of makeshift funeral pyres on road sides as cemeteries ran out of space; panic searches for hospital beds and ventilators, and patients struggling with running out of medical oxygen last year. With 143,155, or 28 percent, of India's highly undercounted official COVID-19 deaths, Maharashtra has suffered the most recorded COVID-19 deaths of any Indian state.

Modi is not attacking Congress and the AAP, which has links to India's Stalinist parties, because they criminally abandoned hundreds of millions migrants to their own fate. Indeed, Modi's central government itself bears the principal responsibility for washing its hands of the fate of India's workers and rural masses.

Modi's ill-prepared lockdown triggered a massive humanitarian crisis, plunging hundreds of millions of migrant workers into misery. Facing joblessness and with no proper food, medicine and shelter coming from the government, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers had no other option but to flee back to their villages, thousands of kilometres away. Thousands had to walk on foot and hundreds died of hunger or were run over by passing trains as they slept.

Ultimately, authorities stopped migrant workers from leaving urban areas and dragged them into makeshift shelters without proper medical attention, food or water. They largely had to depend on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), other voluntary groups and individuals for food and medical support.

This indifference of Modi and the Indian ruling class for the poor was further exposed when the government admitted that it did not have any data on how many migrant workers lost their jobs or their lives during the lockdown, or how many died in the pandemic. The Ministry of Labour and Employment in September 2020 informed the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament, that "no such data is maintained." So much for their posturing about concern for working people!

By cynically denouncing the lockdown's effects, and blaming them exclusively on his political rivals, Modi is trying to justify the policy of mass infection that his government and other capitalist governments internationally are now pursuing. Modi acts with utter contempt for the death toll, which, according to independent research, is at least eight times higher than the official death toll of 507,208 in India.

Questioned on February 7 in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of parliament, government officials said they had no information on the number of dead bodies floating in the Ganges River during the peak of the COVID-19 wave in May last year. Masses of corpses of COVID-19 victims were dumped in the river, by the relatives of the deceased who could not afford funerals. Likewise, last July, the Health Ministry informed the parliament that it had no data on COVID-19 deaths due to medical oxygen shortages, which claimed countless lives last year.

Today, hundreds die of COVID-19 every single day in India. On February 9, India reported 1,217 COVID-19 deaths in 24 hours, and the seven-day average of daily deaths stood at 1,044.

Nevertheless, the Indian government and media once again are parroting the lie that the situation is returning to "normal." On February 9, India registered 71,365 new cases, putting the overall infection count at 42.41 million. Superficially, this shows a significant reduction of daily infections compared to a week ago, when India registered 161,386 daily cases.

The fall in cases corresponds, however, to a fall in testing over the same period, to 1.57 million tests from 1.74 million on February 2. The government hides this to hide the true state of affairs.

Based on these manipulated numbers, the government is pressing ahead with abandoning even limited COVID-19 restrictions and reopening schools. The BJP state government of Assam will withdraw all COVID-19 restrictions from February 15, BJP Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said Monday, citing a "sharp decline" in new cases over the past two weeks. There will be no night curfew, and shopping malls and cinema halls can function at full capacity, he said, adding that weddings could be held so long as guests are double vaccinated.

The same is occurring in Haryana on February 10; on February 7, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala and Delhi reopened schools for higher classes and Bihar for all students.

Abandoning all restrictions as the highly infectious Omicron variant spreads continues Modi's criminal herd immunity policy of letting the virus rip through the population unchecked. This will result in a massive spike of infections and deaths in coming days.

In recent days, Modi has also repeatedly boasted of "higher" vaccination rates in India to imply that his government has resolved the pandemic. In reality, India has fully vaccinated only 52.43 percent of its population, leaving hundreds of millions totally unprotected from the virus.

Only 2 percent of the fully vaccinated population has received a recommended booster shot. Nevertheless, Modi drastically cut the budget for pan-India vaccinations from 350 billion rupees (US$4.6 billion) in 2021–22 to 50 billion rupees ($669 million) in 2022–23. The Health Ministry's budget fell 7 percent in real terms. Moreover, the share of health spending in the total Indian budget fell from 2.35 percent last year to 2.26 percent.

This makes clear that the ruling elite protects not the well-being of the Indian people, but the profit interests of a handful of the super-rich.

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