

The Pandemic, the crisis and the struggle of the Indian working class

Irfan Khan Tue, 28/07/2020 - 08:25

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In India, almost one and a half million people have been infected by the coronavirus by the end of July. On 26.7. 1.435.435 infections were officially registered, 32,771 have died during the last months. Given the enormous rise in cases in recent weeks, the whole country is likely to be at the beginning, rather than at the end, of the disaster. Official figures show 40,000 or more people are hit by the virus daily, but it is widely understood that this is an underestimate.

The Indian Institute of Science calculates that the high point of the infections will only be reached in September, and this is its 'best-case' scenario. The worst case estimates as many as 61 million infected by March 2021.

From the very beginning, the Modi government and its policies have been a part of the problem, rather than of the solution. It put the whole of India into lock-down in late March when it had only 564 cases of Covid-19. Although the prime minister continues to claim that their efforts to fight the pandemic are effective, the reality is that India is now the world's third worst infected country. This will be a healthcare disaster not only for India but also for the world. Till now, the government has been unable to control or offer any solution to the pandemic.

From lock-down to unlocking the economy

The BJP and its social media have been boosting Modi for supposedly restricting the spread of the pandemic with a timely lockdown, but its implementation was among the most brutal and inhumane in the world. Millions of migrant workers were locked out from work without any income or even any means of transport back to the villages or towns they originally came from. Millions were forced to march for hundreds of miles to reach their villages, carrying their belongings or even their children with them. Hundreds of thousands of workers assembled at railway stations in Delhi and other cities in order to get home, effectively being forced to ignore the risk of infection. Hundreds of thousands decided to go back to avoid getting infected in over-crowded buses.

One result was an unforeseen oversupply of cheap flats or rooms in major centres. Indian newspapers reported that 1.28 million flats remained unsold in 30 major cities of the country. In principle, the government could have used these to provide shelter for the poor and people without income. It could have confiscated them or forced the owner to open them. The same is true for hotels, clubs and Ashrams to avoid at least a part of the misery and even death these workers faced.

Modi's lockdown created a humanitarian crisis in this country of 1.3 billion people. The crisis, that began with the mass exit of the migrant workers, exposed the class and caste divide of Indian society. The Modi regime's indifference towards the poor people's difficulties highlighted its anti-working class

character. The migrant workers faced not only road and rail accidents but hunger and even starvation while walking hundreds of miles from the cities. They also often faced repression by the state machinery, including police baton charged and chemical fogging. This shows the real face of new and shining India.

Modi's lock down was not planned and the working class and poor have faced the consequences. His government simply imposed the measures taken by other countries without taking into account India's own realities. Now, it has reopened large sectors of the economy, going for an imaginary herd immunity. This unlock puts the economy, more precisely the profits of Indian and imperialist capital, before the lives of the working class, the peasantry and the poor. By opening the economy, the government is forcing tens of millions of low wage workers to return to unsafe workplaces.

In the end, the sole responsibility for preventing the spread of Covid-19 is placed on the individual. Even though there are restrictions in some states, all of them are encouraging industries and workplaces to re-open and in reality there are no safety measures implemented.

Unlocking the economy, however, does not mean any benefit for the millions of Indians who are unemployed, it only means saving the property and securing future profits for the super-rich. For example, for Mukesh Ambani, chairman of Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL), who is so wealthy now that he has left Warren Buffet and Elon Musk, as well as Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page, behind. According to Bloomberg's Billionaires Index, he is now the world's sixth-richest man.

Ambani's net worth is now \$72.4 billion. It is clear why Ambani's wealth has been increasing for years, although most Indians are facing poverty and economic catastrophe. It is an open secret that Modi and his government have been putting all resources and money in the service of Ambani and other capitalists.

The surge in the profits of some companies in the worst economic situation is also giving some hope to the Modi regime. It aims to attract big business and investment from the US, Japan and the European Union. Modi emphasizes that India's economy will be able to reverse the tide. This unfounded optimism is well-received by his die-hard fans and the capitalist class.

Economic and social crisis

In reality, the Indian economy is in a gloomy situation right now. It's not just the Covid-19 pandemic or the lockdown that worsened the situation, rather, it's the global economic crisis of capitalism that has pushed the Indian economy into its own terrible crisis.

Even though the government does not accept that the lockdown failed to meet its goals, the economy was already facing a serious problem before covid-19 and the pandemic, which only revealed the reality of the economic situation of India.

The IMF estimates that the Indian economy will contract by 4.5 percent in 2020. There are even worse projections that claim that it can go down even by 10 percent. Unemployment in urban and rural areas is estimated at about 25 percent according to OECD reports from June 2020.

The Modi government on the other hand used lockdown as an opportunity to implement anti-working class legislation. It presented a bill reducing 44 labour protection laws to four. The Gujarat government has extended the working day to 12 hours. BJP-led governments in different states suspended labour laws like the Trade Union Act, the Industrial Dispute Act and others.

Joint action

A joint action committee of the Central Trade Unions, CTU, came together to hold nation-wide protests

against draconian changes in labour laws, the privatisation of government departments and public sector undertakings and for the rights of unorganized sector workers. Members of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, INTUC, All India Trade Union Congress, AITUC, Hindu Mazdoor Sabha, HMS, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, CITU, Self Employed Women's Association, SEWA, among others observed a Nationwide Protest Day on July 3, 2020 throughout the country, in all workplaces and centres as a united struggle of Non-Cooperation and Defiance to anti-worker, anti-farmer, anti-people and anti-national policies of the Govt. The actions were reportedly organised in almost one hundred thousand places in all states, in workplaces, offices, on roads and streets.

A statement by the CTU said that through the protests, they

?... reiterated their opposition to disinvestment and wholesale privatisation of Public Sector Enterprises, entry of FDI in core sectors up to the tune of 100 per cent - Indian railways, Defence, Port and Dock, Coal, Air India, Banks, Insurance including of Privatisation of Space Science & Atomic Energy etc., Public sector banks, insurance and other financial sectors are also being targeted for large-scale privatisation. Steps in favour of Corporates of Indian & Foreign brands to usurp natural resources and business of the country while mouthing the slogan of Aatma-Nirbhar Bharat are being pushed through shamelessly. The decision of DA to freeze 480,000 Central Government Employees and DR freeze of 680,000 pensioners, which is also having an impact on the state government employees, is not withdrawn despite vehement opposition from Government employees and CTUs. Neither was the demand of a cash transfer of Rs.7500/- to all non-income tax paying persons accepted.? (<http://www.citucentre.org/672-9th-august-save-india-day> ^[1])

The working class and the poor are starting to turn their rage against the pro-capitalist and privatising policies of Modi's government into action. The rate of unemployment had reached 27 percent by April. The Medium and Small Enterprises themselves reported that 30 to 35 percent of units may not be able to begin activities. The Indian Labour Organisation said that more than 400 million people would be pushed into deeper poverty and that malnutrition would increase and hunger deaths would become a daily reality.

Instead of focusing on the urgent needs of these millions of workers, the government is attacking any opposition and is arresting student and labour activists during this pandemic. Student leaders who organised the protests against the citizenship law this year are now arrested across the country and charged.

The anti-worker policies of the Modi regime, his lock down failure and pro-capitalist policies, mean that the huge Indian working class have no other option, but to unite and fight against him and the ruling class he represents. We have seen general strike earlier this year, before Covid-19, in which more than 200 million workers participated. Coal workers, who were already on three day strike action, joined the 3 July strike and also many other public sector workers are preparing for strike action. The farmers are also condemning the new legislation in agriculture sector. It is clear that there will be big fights ahead. In this situation, the Indian working class needs its own party, equipped with a socialist programme, which will fight against the Draconian laws and for the overthrow of Modi government but this movement can only achieve its goals if it overthrows capitalism and fights for socialism.

How to go forward?

The Trade Unions have announced another national day of action on 9th August and for solidarity action with the Coal Strike day on 18th August. These can become a focus of joint action, demonstrations of strength and determination. But they need to be linked up into an all-out struggle of the working class to secure health provision, safety, jobs and income. In order to fight the spread of the pandemic, the health sector and all resources have to be nationalised and reorganised under a plan controlled by the health workers, doctors and trade unions as well as organisations of the peasants, the rural and urban poor.

The working class needs to resist all scrapping of labour laws and safety regulations. Instead, a minimum wage, unemployment and social benefits for the poor and pensions need to be introduced. These need to be enough to cover the costs of food, medicine, transport, housing ? for all working people and the level should be set by trade unions and representatives of employed and unemployed workers. These need to be financed by taxing or, where necessary, confiscation of the wealth of the rich.

All the large industries, commercial and financial capital, be they Indian or foreign, who are threatening closures, sackings or scrapping of labour regulations, need to be expropriated without compensation. The working class needs to take control over those industries, including deciding which branches to stop during the pandemic and which to expand or continue under its control.

All these measures can only be achieved by determined, all-out class struggle against the ruling class, the Modi government, its repressive state apparatus and reactionary Hindu nationalist or even fascist movements. Such a struggle to be successful will require an all-out general strike, mass demonstrations, occupations of enterprises, factories and land. For this, the trade unions will be key, but this itself requires that they go beyond limited daily actions. It will be crucial that, in the workplaces, the communities, the towns and villages, committees of action to democratically control and lead the strike and its defence are elected by and accountable to mass assemblies. Given the increasingly dictatorial character of the Modi regime, its forces and the Hindu-nationalist movement, the strikes and communities will need to be protected by organisations of self-defence.

Clearly, such a mass movement, a general strike, which could be brought about in the coming period, will pose the question of power; a question the working class will need to answer not only with determination, but also with clarity, by fighting for a workers' and peasants' government based workers' and peasants' councils. The action committees created to organise the movement could develop into such councils as the movement and struggles develop, just as the self-defence organs could develop into a militia of the workers, peasants and poor which, together with soldiers' councils in the army, could break up and replace the repressive state apparatus of the Indian bourgeoisie.

Most importantly, a workers' and peasants' government would take decisive action to implement an emergency programme to secure health, to eradicate poverty and to reorganise the Indian economy in the interest of the many, not the few. In short, it would nationalise all large scale capital under working class control, expropriate the capitalist class and introduce a democratic plan, thereby opening the road not only to a socialist transformation of India, but also to spreading the revolution to the whole of South Asia and beyond.

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[1] <http://www.citucentre.org/672-9th-august-save-india-day>