

India sets world record for daily coronavirus infections

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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India reported a disastrous 83,883 new COVID-19 infections on Thursday—the highest daily total of any country since the pandemic began. When taken together with a death toll increasing by approximately 1,000 per day, it is manifestly evident that the Indian ruling elite has failed abysmally to contain the pandemic.

The ill-prepared, ten-week nationwide lockdown imposed by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, beginning on March 25, had devastating social consequences for hundreds of millions of workers and their families, while failing to halt the pandemic's spread. This was above all because the ruling elite failed to use the time gained by the lockdown to invest in the country's chronically underfunded health care system, and establish a strong network of testing and contact tracing to combat the virus. Additionally, it refused to provide and organize anything beyond token financial and social support to impoverished workers and rural toilers.

The central and state governments subsequently exploited the social crisis to launch a back-to-work campaign that began in late April and went into high gear at the start of June, so as to enable big business to resume raking in large profits.

The return to work has triggered a sharp and ever-expanding 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.

Even as the spread of the virus continues to accelerate, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have made it clear there will not be another countrywide lockdown. In fact, the government is continuing to ease restrictions.

Last week it unveiled its Unlock 4.0 plan, which is now being implemented with the support of the state governments. Under Unlock 4.0, poorly ventilated subway trains will be permitted to run for the first time since March starting from September 7. As of September 21, sports, social, and cultural gatherings with a maximum of 100 attendees will be allowed. The guidelines issued by the

Union Ministry of Home Affairs say that states are no longer permitted to impose lockdowns outside of containment zones without the Centre's permission, a provision that all but rules out widespread lockdowns ever being re-imposed. In addition, state governments are prohibited from sealing their borders.

As governments move to abandon the last remnants of any public health restrictions, active coronavirus infections across India have risen above 800,000. According to official figures, which are widely considered to be a vast underestimation, 68,584 Indians have died from the virus. On Thursday, the authorities reported 1,043 deaths in the preceding 24 hours.

In August alone, India reported close to 2 million COVID-19 cases, which is the highest number any country has recorded during any month since the pandemic erupted in China last January. August also saw a surge in death from the virus with 28,859 fatalities, a 50 percent jump from the previous month's toll.

Like the Trump administration, Indian authorities have tried to explain away the exponential growth in COVID-19 cases by attributing it to increased testing. While it is true India has dramatically scaled up its testing over the past two months, its testing rate still remains one of the lowest in the world. As of September 1, India had performed a mere 32.13 tests per one thousand people. This is less than half the rate of South Africa, and eight times lower than the US.

Medical experts have repeatedly stressed that the official figures only provide a pale reflection of the pandemic's true impact. In an interview with the website Wire, Professor Ashish Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, noted on Monday that the true number of infections could be as high as 30 million. "We are only picking up about 70,000-80,000 or 15 percent of that and missing 85 percent," he commented. In the "days and weeks ahead" the "number of infections is going to rise."

Pointing to "India's under-investment in its health system for decades," Professor Jha added, "The cost of that is really catching up to us. We don't have primary care ... (due to)

inadequate investment from the government. ... And the cost of that will be borne by the people.”

Successive governments, including those led by the Congress Party and supported by India’s twin Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Communist Party of India, limited health care spending to 1.5 percent of GDP or less.

The entire ruling elite has now embraced the murderous policy of “herd immunity,” which allows the virus to spread unchecked with the claim that eventually it will exhaust itself by running out of people to infect. Advocates of this policy, including senior government advisors, have openly admitted that this will result in a death toll in the millions. However, the ruling class considers this a price worth paying to protect the profits and wealth of India’s billionaires and corporate elite.

The virus has spread so widely that infections have even been detected on the remote Andaman and Nicobar Islands (A&N), which are located over 1,000 kilometres from the mainland. At least 10 infections have been recorded among members of local tribes, who live in extreme poverty and isolation and are thus very vulnerable to the virus.

The pandemic has also put millions of patients at risk who suffer from other major diseases, like diabetes and heart conditions. Sameer Gupta, an interventional cardiologist at the Metro Hospitals and Heart Institute in Delhi, told the IndiaSpend website on August 26 that COVID-19 is damaging patients’ hearts, and those with a pre-existing heart condition are especially at risk of succumbing to the disease. He also stressed that “recovered” COVID-19 patients are returning to hospital with stress cardiomyopathy—a temporary weakening of the heart muscle—and myocarditis, a weakness of the heart muscle due to inflammation.

The ruling class, however, is much more concerned by the threat to their wealth from the deepening economic crisis, which Modi is proposing to overcome by implementing a fresh wave of investor-friendly “reforms,” including the gutting of labour laws and a fire-sale of public sector enterprises. Data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on August 31 showed that India’s GDP fell by 23.9 percent in the April-June quarter. This was the largest decline of any major economy, according to Bloomberg.

India’s 28 state governments have slashed spending and, as their financial positions worsen, many are delaying paying state government workers. According to one estimate, the shortfall in revenue from the Goods and Service Tax (GST) has reached 2.35 trillion rupees (\$US 32.18 billion). In a calculated move designed to enforce spending cuts, the BJP government has withheld paying the states their designated share of GST revenues and Union

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has told them to make up for the shortfalls by borrowing from the Reserve Bank of India under its “special borrowing window.”

Several states, including many led by the opposition parties, have rejected the government’s proposal, urging the central government to borrow the money and pass it on to the states. However this dispute is resolved, the revenue shortfall will result in increased burdens being placed on the workers and rural toilers through intensified austerity measures.

Conditions for the vast majority of workers are already disastrous. Immediately after Modi declared the COVID-19 lockdown in March, more than 100 million workers in the so-called informal sector, mostly migrant workers from far-away rural districts, lost their jobs overnight. Many relied on food handouts from charities to survive because the government provided them with little more than famine rations.

Workers employed on a permanent basis have also not been spared. New data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), an independent body that measures and tracks economic indicators, estimated that 18.9 million permanent jobs were lost between April and July.

Despite the escalating social disaster produced by the spreading of the virus throughout the country, India’s mainstream media is giving it little attention. Instead, it has focused on the suicide of Sushant Singh Rajput, a famous Bollywood actor, which took place in mid-June. Media outlets have also intensified their efforts to whip up a bellicose Indian nationalist atmosphere over the ongoing India-China tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between the two countries.

The corporate media’s indifference to the mass suffering and death is in line with the callous and ignorant attitude of the Indian ruling class as a whole. This is true not only of Modi’s ruling Hindu supremacist BJP but also of the opposition parties, including Congress and the various regional and caste-based bourgeois parties.

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