

India now second only to US in number of COVID-19 cases, yet continues to expand “reopening”

By Deepal Jayasekera
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After recording over 90,000 new infections on Monday, India surpassed Brazil as the country with the second highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world.

Despite the calamitous situation, which includes approximately 1,000 daily deaths, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the various state governments are pushing ahead with the reopening of the economy. This includes the state governments led or supported by the opposition Congress Party and various regional and caste-ist parties, and their Stalinist collaborators in the CPM and CPI.

According to figures released by India’s Ministry of Health, the country reported a new single day world record for new infections with 90,802 Monday, pushing India’s official total above 4.2 million. For about a month, India has reported the highest number of daily cases in the world. The death toll has climbed to 71,642.

The pace at which the virus is spreading has dramatically accelerated over the past month. Whereas around 55,000 new daily cases were being recorded in the first week of August, India is now averaging well in excess of 80,000 new cases per day. The total number of confirmed COVID-19 infections in India has doubled from 2 million to more than 4 million within just one month. It took just 13 days for infections to increase by one million, from 3 million on August 22 to 4 million on September 4.

Horrible as these figures are, they are a substantial underestimation of the true scale of the crisis. Virtually all experts agree that due to a miserably low-testing rate, only a fraction of COVID-19 infections are being identified. Some have even suggested that India has already surpassed the United States to become the worst impacted country in the world.

Dr. Ramanan Laxminarayan, a public health researcher and director of the Washington-based Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy (CDDEP) told CBS News: “It’s only a matter of time before India crosses (the) US. We are talking about reported infections, and given the low levels of testing, it is certainly possible that actual infections in India

have already exceeded those in the U.S.” He added that “seroprevalence” screening of blood samples “indicate that there have been at least 100 million infections” in India.

The callous and criminal policies of the Modi government at the center and the various state governments have produced enormous social suffering in addition to the health catastrophe.

Modi’s ill-conceived and ill-prepared coronavirus national lockdown, which was implemented on March 25 with less than four hours’ notice, was a total failure. The Indian ruling elite refused to use the time bought by the lockdown to implement a comprehensive system of mass testing and contact tracing, or to pour resources into the country’s chronically under-resourced public health care system.

Moreover, the BJP government provided the tens of millions of impoverished workers who lost their jobs overnight due to the lockdown no more than famine-style relief programs, resulting in widespread destitution, homelessness, and hunger. The lockdown and the government’s refusal to provide social support has produced an unprecedented economic collapse. In the quarter ending in June, India’s GDP declined by 23.9 percent, the largest recorded drop among major economies.

The ruling class subsequently exploited this social misery to push workers back on the job, so that the extraction of profit through sweatshop exploitation could resume. The BJP government started sanctioning the removal of lockdown restrictions on export industries and other industrial concerns in late April. This quickly led to a spike in infections.

The virus has now spread throughout the country, entrenching itself in poor neighbourhoods in many major cities and in rural areas, where health care facilities are non-existent. It has even reached the remote Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are located more than 1,000 kilometers from the mainland.

The surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths has caused no let-up or even pause in the drive of the Modi government and its state counterparts to reopen the economy. Putting profits before human lives, they are pursuing “herd immunity”—a homicidal policy in which the authorities allow the virus to run rampant until it expends itself by infecting the overwhelming

majority of the population.

Most businesses have now been allowed to reopen. Social distancing and other elementary preventive measures, which were always impossible for the tens of millions of urban poor who live five or more to a room and without access to proper sanitation, have been largely abandoned. Markets in towns and cities across the country are once again teeming with people, increasing the risk of a further acceleration of infections.

As per the fourth phase of the Modi government's "Unlockdown," on Monday, the same day as India set a new world record for daily infections, subway train networks resumed in the national capital, Delhi, and in more than ten other cities, ending a five-month shutdown. With large numbers of people crammed into poorly-ventilated subways, infections and deaths are certain to increase sharply.

The reopening of the Delhi Metro, the country's largest rapid transport system, is particularly reckless given the volume of passengers and the recent uptick in coronavirus cases in the capital. Before its forced closure in March, it carried an average of 2.7 million passengers daily in packed trains. The Yellow Line, which was first to reopen, runs between north Delhi and the satellite city of Gurgaon, an industrial and IT hub in the northern Indian state of Haryana. This is the busiest route, connecting 37 stations and carrying around 1.45 million passengers daily.

In another example of the ruling elite's indifference to the threat posed by the deadly virus to working people, the National Testing Agency (NTA), a central government agency, is going ahead with university entrance examinations in major cities throughout the country. Protests by angry students, many of whom have to travel significant distances to participate, were ignored. The Supreme Court, siding with the Modi government's decision, dismissed an appeal filed on behalf of students on August 17. The Court claimed that failing to hold the exams would put students' careers "in peril." It added: "Life should move on even in COVID-19 times." This is entirely in keeping with the mantra of the Modi government and its state counterparts. They all insist that businesses must reopen and workers be forced to toil in unsafe conditions, so that life can return to "normal," i.e. the ruling class can continue to enrich itself.

Like their counterparts around the world, the Modi government and India's capitalist elite as a whole, have seized upon the pandemic to shift bourgeois politics further right. In Modi's own words, his government is pushing ahead with a "quantum jump" in economic reforms, i.e. pro-investor policies to attract global capital. The "reforms" include stepped up privatisations, drastic changes to labor laws so that employers can "hire and fire" workers at will, the relaxation of regulations on the use of land for corporate development, and harsher austerity measures.

To divert the mounting social anger towards its policies in a reactionary direction, Modi is also whipping up a bellicose

Indian nationalism by intensifying India's border conflict with China. In this, he has been encouraged by US imperialism, which views India as a crucial partner in its economic and military-strategic offensive against Beijing.

On Monday, tensions between India and China escalated yet again when shots were fired during a dispute between Indian and Chinese troops over where the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between the two countries, lies. Each side accused the other of firing the first shot. Although several dozen Indian and Chinese soldiers died in a clash fought with rods and knives on a Himalayan ridge in June, this marked the first time that there had been an exchange of live fire between the two sides in 45 years.

So acute has become the danger of a military conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers that even sections of India's mainstream media that have been urging New Delhi to resist Chinese "aggression" are now expressing alarm. "We are on the verge of entering a dangerous escalation matrix that could lead to full-blown war," declared an editorial in the *Times of India*. "If that happens, it would be a catastrophe."

In opposition to the Modi government's right-wing policies, growing numbers of workers have participated in strikes and other protests in recent weeks. Anger has been especially directed at planned privatisations and the authorities' failure to supply adequate personal protective equipment for health-care and other frontline workers during the pandemic.

The only way that the relentless spread of the coronavirus can be stopped, working people shielded from the pandemic's ruinous economic fallout, and the Indian ruling elite's incendiary alliance with US imperialism and stoking of military conflict can be successfully opposed is if the working class constitutes itself as an independent political force. It must rally the rural poor and other toilers behind it in the fight for a workers' government and socialism.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in its statement, "For international working class action against the COVID-19 pandemic!":

"Control over the response to the pandemic must be taken out of the hands of the capitalist class. Mass action by the working class, coordinated on an international scale, is necessary to bring the pandemic under control and save millions of lives that are now at risk. The fight against the pandemic is not only, or even primarily, a medical issue. It is, above all, a matter of social and political struggle."

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