

Indian workers speak out against Modi, trade unions on COVID-19 pandemic

By Sasi Kumar and V. Gnana
15 September 2020

Workers' anger is mounting at the political establishment and the unions in India, which with 4.8 million COVID-19 cases is currently second only to the United States in terms of severity of the pandemic. With the complicity of the trade unions, the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is ordering workers back to work amid a raging pandemic.

According to the Ministry of Health, India saw a single-day spike of 95,735 cases, while the total number infected exceeds 4.6 million. More than 75,000 have died. The Indian Medical Association, representing 350,000 doctors across India, estimates nearly 200 doctors have died of COVID-19. Yet the Modi government is steadily relaxing lockdown rules, and metro trains and road bus transport are running again in major cities across India. As a result, the pandemic is spreading and public hospitals are increasingly overwhelmed.

World Socialist Web Site reporters interviewed workers in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government is abandoning measures to contain the virus. The state has seen nearly a half-million confirmed cases and over 8,000 deaths from COVID-19.

Sivakumar, who is 50, told the WSWS: "I work as a permanent worker in a railway carriage. I also go to work facing the coronavirus risk. There are Hindi-speaking contract workers in my workplace who were not even provided with face masks; we permanent workers received free masks from the administration."

Sivakumar denounced the Indian regime's herd immunity policy and its drive to further enrich the corporations: "Modi has already written off 600 billion rupees [US\$8.2 billion] in corporate debts. But this has

done nothing to help people affected by COVID-19. ... People over the age of 55 were told not to come to work for two months because of the impact of the coronavirus. But now everyone is told to come to work."

Sivakumar also criticized the unions' complicity in Modi's policies and the corrupt role of the Southern Railway Mazdoor Union (SRMU). He said, "The SRMU is the main union here. Its general secretary is Kannaiya. He will make demagogic threats now and then, that if workers' problems are not solved, there will be strikes and the trains won't run. Nevertheless, strikes do not happen, because he has accumulated huge assets. That's why he's scared."

Sivakumar charged the SRMU with blocking workers' attempts to strike against the murderous official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. He said, "Workers want a strike. But the union gave notice and then withdrew it. In the union's public statements, it threatens that rail wheels will not spin in the south if workers' grievances are not addressed. But such talk is only to contain the workers."

About 12 million Indian workers lost their jobs in the April-May lockdown, including 1.89 million regular workers. The remaining 10 million belong to the "informal sector." The Modi government calls to end social distancing, cynically claiming that people are "tired" of staying in small spaces during lockdowns, and that the people want a return to normal. And so the AIADMK has adopted a murderous back-to-work policy in the interest of the banks, without any opposition from the Stalinist Communist Party of India or the Maoist Communist Party of India—Marxist.

Last April, Tamil Nadu state Chief Minister Edappadi Palanisamy claimed COVID-19 impacts only the rich, not the poor. He asked: "Where are the poor people

affected by coronavirus? Only the rich get infected.”

He then claimed, “If you see the poor, you can speak freely, but you are scared to see the rich.” This only highlights that the ruling elite and its political servants live in another political world from hundreds of millions of Indian workers struggling to avoid infection.

Saravanan, 35, works as a security guard. He told the WSWS: “They pay me only 7,000 rupees a month for security work. If you want to rent out a small house in Chennai, you need 10,000 rupees. Three people like me work on daily basis at work sites without renting a house, relaxing in the parks at night. ... We were not provided with a face mask and sanitizer to stay safe. Some apartments do not even have toilet facilities. You can’t keep your hands clean in homes like that.”

Saravanan, who comes from a smaller city, spoke of conditions facing workers in Indian villages and towns: “Jobs are hard to come by. We are angry about the way Edappadi handled the issues faced by the workers during the pandemic. Edappadi says he is proud to have brought the disease under control. But the severity of the disease has increased in the villages.”

Visalam, 50, is a domestic worker. She told the WSWS, “We went to work even during this coronavirus pandemic. I was not even given a mask at homes. I am scared that I might be infected when I go to work in four households.”

Visalam stressed the lack of basic equipment and facilities that she faces: “Four of us live in a small room in the slums of Otteri. We are not even able to keep our hands clean due to lack of running water. Corporation officials came to our homes but did not provide us with the sanitizer and masks needed to keep our homes clean. Politicians come only when they want to campaign for electoral votes.”

In fact, the official pandemic response in India and internationally amounts to a conspiracy against the workers. *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward’s reporting has revealed US President Donald Trump deliberately misled the public about the pandemic. He told Woodward on February 7 that he was “playing it down” despite receiving dire warnings from Chinese President Xi Jinping and from US intelligence briefings stating that COVID-19 is “the biggest national security threat.”

Trump visited India on February 24–25, met with

Modi and doubtless discussed COVID-19. However, Trump, Modi, and broad layers of Indian officials have relentlessly sought since then to downplay the virus, force workers back to work and minimize the deadliness of the pandemic.

Gajendran, 45, is a day labourer. He stressed workers’ deep disillusionment with the political establishment: “I can’t tell you the hardships I endured from May to today. I buy and eat food parcels given by food pantries, charities and others. ... I know the DMK, AIADMK, Communist parties and other parties. I don’t have a home, no matter who comes to power. There are no permanent jobs, not even ration cards. I have been doing paint work, load lifting work.”

He added, “Parties like the DMK, AIADMK, etc., come to hit me when I complain about the parties, so I keep in mind not to say anything out loud.”

Speaking of workers’ desire for a political alternative, Gajendran said, “Now no one is talking about socialism. I’m glad you said that. This comes from the communist parties themselves. They also did not talk about socialism.”

Showing his face mask to WSWS reporters, he said, “They did not even provide a good mask, you see? That in itself is dirty. It would be nice if the workers came to power, as you say. I have told you about my worries: If coronavirus is not eliminated but the government lifts restrictions, I don’t know what will happen.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>