

As COVID-19 pandemic surges across India, business presses for quick return to work

Wasantha Rupasinghe, Keith Jones
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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is to deliver a speech to the nation today, Day 21 in the three-week, all-India anti-coronavirus lockdown he announced without warning—and, as it quickly emerged, serious forethought or planning—on March 24, less than four hours before it came into effect.

In recent days, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have signaled that the lockdown will be extended past Tuesday throughout or, at least, across large swathes of what is the world's second most populous country. However, the government has also indicated that it may announce widespread exemptions for sections of manufacturing and other commercial activity.

During the shutdown, the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths has surged. On Monday, Indian authorities said the previous 24 hours had been the deadliest yet with 51 deaths, bringing total fatalities to 324. The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases was given as 9,352. But by the end of Monday, the media reported that confirmed cases had spiked by a further thousand to 10,440, and that there had been at least 34 additional deaths.

Over the past week, India's confirmed COVID-19 infections have increased by almost two-and-a-half times, while deaths have more than tripled. However, Indian authorities have barely tested 200,000 people in a country of 1.37 billion people, leading most health experts to conclude that the true number of infections is far higher.

At least seven states, home to more than a quarter of India's total population—Odisha, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Punjab—have announced that they are extending the current lockdown of all but “essential” services and businesses until the end of April. Of the seven only Karnataka is currently ruled by the BJP.

India's workers and toilers find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place, due to the criminal negligence of the Modi government and the Indian elite.

The highly contagious and potentially lethal COVID-19 constitutes a grave menace. Widespread poverty—a recent

government study found more than 90 percent of Indian children aged five or less are undernourished—India's dense population and its dilapidated to non-existent public health infrastructure make India especially vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic and a potential catastrophic loss of life.

However, the BJP government's lockdown was implemented without any thought or care as to how hundreds of millions of workers and toilers with little to no savings could survive three weeks without any income, or how families lacking running water and living five or more to a room could regularly wash their hands and practice social distancing.

The result has been a social calamity. The most poignant expression of this has been the plight of the migrant workers employed as day-labourers in construction and sweatshop manufacturing in India's cities. With the government-ordered lockdown, many migrant workers lost both their income and their lodgings, either because the latter were connected to their employment or because their landlords expelled them since they could no longer pay rent.

Left to fend for themselves and with all public transport halted, millions of migrant workers sought to walk back to their native villages, where they hoped to find food and shelter with kith and kin.

Underscoring the haphazard character of the government's actions, only after this mass migration had been unfolding for several days did authorities recognize that it threatened to spread the coronavirus from urban to rural India, where the majority of the population still lives and where health facilities are all but non-existent.

Its response was characteristically brutal. Security forces were ordered to prevent the migrant workers from crossing state boundaries. Millions of migrant workers have now been herded into makeshift internal refugee camps, with most state governments relying on NGOs to provide them with food, drinking water and sanitation. Needless to say, these poorly serviced camps risk becoming centres of illness, including COVID-19.

Summarizing the sentiments of millions of workers who have been confined to these camps for the remainder of the lockdown, Neeraj Kumar asked the *Indian Express*, “Why is the government treating us like criminals?” Kumar, who is now under lockdown in a camp in Uttar Pradesh’s Bahraich District, wanted to know when authorities will “release” them.

The hastily organized shutdown and the government’s even more improvised, thin gruel 1.7 lakh crore rupee (US \$22.5 billion) relief package has pushed hundreds of millions of workers and toilers toward a social abyss.

Unemployment in urban areas, reported the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy last week, is now in excess of 30 percent and in rural areas more than 20 percent.

In announcing the lockdown, Modi, whose Hindu supremacist government has ruthlessly implemented the agenda of big business—austerity, privatization, and the promotion of precarious contract-labour jobs—made a show of instructing the state governments to ensure larger Indian firms keep paying their workers regular wages during the lockdown. Predictably this has proven a cruel hoax.

A survey by Safe in India, an NGO focused on improving occupational health and safety, found that 79 percent of workers employed in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, an auto-manufacturing centre in the northern state of Haryana, had received no pay.

According to a report published by the Scroll.in website, a rapid assessment survey conducted by another NGO, Jan Sahas, found that 80 percent of the country’s migrant and daily wage workers feared that they would run out of food before the end of the lockdown. “Nearly as many also worry that they will not be able to find work once lockdown ends” and over 40 percent of migrant workers surveyed had already run out of all food supplies. Jan Sahas also found that a “large number” of workers would be denied access to the BJP government’s relief package, because they lacked a ration card or due to some other technicality.

Big business is anxious for the lockdown to end so that it can return to ruthlessly sweating profits from workers, and the Modi government as always is anxious to do its bidding.

The *Times of India*, citing “official sources,” reported on April 12 that the central government “in consultation with states is moving to restart economic activities in a graded manner in what is seen as a nuanced change in strategy from saving lives a month ago to saving lives as well as livelihoods now in the fight against the pandemic.”

The government’s Industry Ministry has been pressing for production to resume in at least fifteen sectors, including the auto, steel, telecom equipment, agro-chemical, rubber, and construction industries.

The head of the Federation of Indian Export Organizations

(FIEO) welcomed a memo sent by the Industry Ministry to the Home Ministry pressing for the early resumption of production. “Opening of all export industries,” said FEIO President Sharak Kumar, “large as well as MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) including SEZs (special economic zones) and EOUs (export-oriented units), will help the exporters execute whatever little orders remain with them after huge cancellations in the last two months,” and convince overseas buyers that the situation is fast “normalizing” in India.

Government and industry claims that workplaces can be made safe by reducing the number of employers per shift and maintaining social distancing are a fraud. India’s employers are notorious for their indifference to safety concerns. A 2017 study, for example, found that there are 37 fatalities per day just in the construction industry.

As for the BJP government, it has sought to change India’s labour laws to prioritize company “self-reporting” on their compliance with them, including with health and safety regulations. Moreover, in the face of the coronavirus pandemic New Delhi took no steps to ensure health workers would be provided with the personal protective equipment (PPE) needed to protect themselves, their patients, their families and the broader public from the potentially lethal COVID-19.

To facilitate employers quickly ratcheting up production, at least initially with less than full staff, the Modi government is reportedly preparing to invoke “exceptional circumstances” to modify the Factories Act by decree. It wants to empower companies to force workers to work 12 hours per day, six days a week, or a total of 72 hours per week, and do so without paying stipulated overtime rates.



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