

MARXIST

Theoretical Quarterly of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

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COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA (MARXIST)

CPI(M)'s Intervention during the Pandemic, National Lockdown, and Subsequently

During this period, at the central level, the Polit Bureau of the CPI(M) consistently intervened through statements, through joint Left parties' intervention and calls for action and for forging a larger unity on common issues with other opposition parties.

The CPI(M) prepared an economic roadmap that needed to be implemented and outlined various measures that are required for economic revival and people's survival and livelihood. This document outlined the measures to be undertaken in the immediate; in the short term; and in the long term. However, all these measures will have to be simultaneously implemented. This was communicated to both the President and Prime Minister of India and circulated to leaders of various opposition parties asking them to consider the possibility of organizing a joint movement on the demands contained. The core of these demands was the basis on which 22 opposition parties, in a virtual meeting, decided and adopted a demand charter for such protest actions.

The Party's Polit Bureau and Central Committee met online

and the Central Committee gave a call for a nationwide protest action on a 16-point demand charter.

Of the many communications and calls that were issued by the Party Centre, we are reproducing a few that encapsulated the Party's understanding and its active intervention during this period. The first of these is a letter to the Prime Minister dated March 23, 2020, a day before the announcement of the abrupt unplanned national lockdown.

* * *

CPI(M) General Secretary's Letter to the Prime Minister dated March 23, 2020 on Covid-19

Dear Pradhan Mantri ji,

The country and the people are in the midst of the grim battle against the spread of COVID-19. In many states, a general lockdown is being enforced to stop the community spread of this lethal virus.

During such lockdowns, it is imperative to scale up the testing of people particularly those with declared symptoms. On this basis, specific areas that are vulnerable can be identified and a lockdown enforced in such areas.

All testing kits approved by the National Institute of Virology must be utilized. It is strange that the Union Health Ministry has issued a circular that only those testing kits approved by the US FDA and European EC alone will be used.

Reports indicate that there is only one manufacturer in Gujarat who produces such kits. In view of the gravity of the situation, this circular must be withdrawn and all kits approved by the NIV must be deployed for use, urgently.

Crores of families that survive on the daily earnings of their family are currently suffering grievously because of such lockdowns. It is necessary that immediately at least Rs 5,000 should

be transferred to the Jan Dhan accounts and BPL beneficiaries.

Ration kits must be supplied to the families of the children who used to benefit from the mid-day meal scheme. Free ration through PDS to all BPL/APL families should be given for a month.

Many countries in the world have announced that the government will guarantee the payment of at least 80 per cent of the salaries being drawn by workers who are now unable to attend work. Government of India should do likewise. Alongside there should be a moratorium on bank loans for a year for SMEs and retail traders as well as on EMIs.

Now that the Finance Bill has been approved by the Parliament, the Central government must set aside separate funds for a substantial package to save the lives and livelihood of crores of people.

This is the time to use our resources for saving lives and not be preoccupied by concerns to maintain fiscal discipline.

Regards,
Yours truly
Sd/-
(Sitaram Yechury)
General Secretary

* * *

CPI(M) General Secretary's Statement dated March 26, 2020, on Finance Minister's Covid Package

INADEQUATE
DEFEATS THE AIM OF PREVENTING
'COMMUNITY-SPREAD'

There is no time to waste,

Lives have been uprooted by no planning by Centre before

declaring a lockdown despite a two-month warning.

This is not the time to be pre-occupied by 'fiscal deficit'.

If Rs 7.78 lakh crore worth of loans of the rich can be waived off, then clearly there is no dearth of resources.

The priority is to save human lives and defeat the pandemic.

The Rs 1.75 lakh crore package announced today missed out on a crucial issue of the migrant workers returning to their own states. We have airlifted Indians from many countries abroad, surely our own brethren should have been provided with food and shelter, to either stay where they are currently or to be transported to their home states.

This failure is defeating the purpose of this 21-day lockdown when big crowds are surging, threatening 'community-spread'. This should be remedied at once.

Though there are some proposals that merit worth like the provision of doubling food-grains, the provision of free gas cylinders for three months, a one-kg per family of pulses is thoroughly inadequate. The key to resist COVID-19 is good nutrition. This does not serve the purpose.

The announcement to give Rs 1,000 to aged widows and the disabled is too little. All of them need help and assistance to go about their lives. How will Rs 1,000 suffice?

The insurance cover for health workers come at no cost to the government. There is no clarity if this covers the private sector. What they require immediately is protective gear, medicines and adequate testing facilities. There is no mention of this.

Government has announced that each farmer would be given Rs 2,000. But this is the first instalment that is due to them, under the PMKY (PM KISAN Yojana), announced just before 2019 polls.

The transfer of Rs 500 to Jan Dhan accounts held by women is too inadequate. We had asked for a direct transfer of Rs 5,000 for each month for the next three months, for all Jan Dhan account-holders and BPL families.

There is no substantial benefit for Workers. The 24 per cent of

monthly wages into their own Provident Fund (PF) accounts does not give them any extra relief—this is their due, their own savings!

What Government Must Do Now

Hunger and malnutrition can be contained through the provision of ration kits to all the poor, particularly the families of children availing the mid-day meal scheme. Kerala is doing this.

In the face of large-scale layoffs and retrenchment, the government must guarantee the payment of wages for the next three months at the very least.

Farmers must get a one-time waiver on their loans.

This is the harvesting season. Produce must be guaranteed to be lifted at the declared minimum support prices at least and farmers helped to harvest safely. This must be a priority.

For the middle classes, especially employees, relief should be provided by a moratorium on repayment of loans and the deferring of EMIs.

Credit-availability to self-help groups means nothing for the 6.85 crore households in the country as all their activities have come to a standstill. Help them with money to survive and be healthy.

The enhancement of the MNREGA wages by Rs 20 is a joke. Currently there is no work going on. What they need is direct cash transfers, or payment of wages irrespective of work.

* * *

CPI(M) General Secretary's Letter to the President of India dated April 6, 2020

Hon'ble Rashtrapati ji,

I am writing to you, as you are the custodian of the Indian Constitution under whose sanction and authority the Central Government functions.

The country and people have gone through two 'symbolic' events so far. Disturbingly, yesterday's symbolic event was observed by many as a celebration by bursting crackers, as the country is in the midst of this grim battle against the pandemic. I'm sure you would agree that such symbolism cannot substitute urgent concrete measures that need to be undertaken by the government.

I am constrained to seek your intervention as my earlier communications to the honourable Prime Minister and Finance Minister have not seen much response. As this is 'your government', I, on behalf of our people, appeal to you to consider the following issues and direct the government accordingly in the interests of battling and defeating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Prime Minister's announcement of a 21-day countrywide lockdown came with a mere four-hour notice. However, the single-day 'Janata Curfew' that he had called on March 22 had a two-day notice so that people could be prepared.

This lockdown has been forced without any prior preparation, neither by the government nor by the people. The result has been a degree of chaos and anarchy which defeats the very objective of containing community transmission of this pandemic.

Hence, I request you to direct the government to address the following issues on a war-footing:

1. MIGRANT WORKERS

Lakhs and lakhs of migrant workers who have lost their livelihood and daily earnings due to this lockdown have been rushing back to their homes, hundreds of kilometres away. Further, this is the harvesting season and many of them return to help out their families during this period.

The Government had organized special flights to evacuate Indians stranded abroad. Similar arrangements could have been made through trains and buses if not planes for our brethren,

failing which temporary shelters maintaining personal distance should have been made prior to the announcement with adequate provision of rations and stay facilities.

2. STATES NOT TAKEN INTO CONFIDENCE

Federalism is a fundamental feature of our Constitution. Article 1 of the Indian Constitution defines 'India, that is Bharat, is a Union of States'.

Unfortunately, the Prime Minister did not take the elected state governments into confidence before announcing the countrywide lockdown. Many states were completely unprepared as a consequence.

Now asking the state governments to take the responsibility for the migrant workers' crisis is very unfair. The central government must generously financially support the states in these efforts. The announcements recently made of transfers from The State Disaster Risk Management Fund are meagre and inadequate.

3. MITIGATE ADVERSE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

a) Crores of people have lost their earning capacity. We cannot allow a severe crisis of mass hunger and shortage of food to occur. I am sure you will agree that this must be prevented at all costs.

In the central FCI godowns in the country, there is a stock of nearly 7.5 crores tonnes of foodgrains. Rather than this stock becoming rotten or feeding rodents, it should be immediately lifted and dispatched to the states for distribution among people who have lost their earnings.

b) The economic consequences of this lockdown have further exacerbated the recession that had set in before the outbreak of the pandemic. Many firms are laying off workers and in many states there have been substantial salary cuts. The government has

ordered that salaries should be maintained but in practice this is not happening. Employers are saying that since their business has come to a standstill they cannot pay salaries.

The governments of many countries have undertaken to compensate the employers, some to the tune of 80 per cent of their wage bill. 'Your government' should likewise announce such a measure.

c) The loans taken by crores of middle-class people need to be repaid in instalments. Such payments must be deferred by at least three months. Likewise EMI payable must be also be deferred by three months. Deferment must be interest free.

d) The agrarian distress is bound to intensify. Under these circumstances, 'your government' must immediately announce a one-time waiver of loans taken by our kisans. This is perfectly possible given that so far loans worth Rs 7.78 lakh crores taken by our super-rich corporates have been waived by this government. Surely, such empathy can also be extended to our 'annadatas'.

4. SHORTAGE OF MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

There are numerous reports about acute shortage of critical medical equipment. Our courageous health workers, braving the most adverse of circumstances do not have proper protective gear. Already there are reports from many hospitals of them contracting the infection. Aggressive augmentation of PPE's must undertaken immediately.

There is a likelihood of shortage of hospital space for isolation wards which, at least now, should, be augmented urgently. There is an acute shortage of ventilators, which must be acquired promptly.

It is being universally commented that the testing rate in India is one of, if not, the lowest in the world. As opposed to 7,659 per million in South Korea, in India the figure is an abysmal low of 32. This is extremely dangerous for the future. The country needs to test as extensively as possible, identify the clusters where the virus

is being transmitted, isolate them and enforce lockdown in those areas and not countrywide.

These measures must be undertaken on a war-footing and 'your government' must be directed to do this.

5. NEW COVID-19 FUND

Strangely, 'your government' has established a new fund to combat this pandemic called the 'PM Cares'. Statutorily, the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund has been in existence since Independence. This fund is transparent, accountable and audited by the CAG. The 'PM Cares' fund on the other hand is administered by a trust of four—the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the Defence Minister and the Finance Minister. How the fund will be collected, disbursed, what is its accountability—all these are unknown. There are disturbing reports of coercive collections, automatic deduction of a day's salary from government employees and professionals, including health workers, without their concurrence.

Already some thousands of crores have been collected from the corporates, celebrities, public sector undertakings and salary cuts.

The country has the experience of a similarly administered fund called 'Bharat ke Veer' established after the Pulwama terrorist attack to assist the victims of that tragedy and their families. Till date its details have not appeared in the public domain. I'm sure you would agree that such fund is non transparent and non-accountable. How can you permit 'your government' to do this?

I am seeking your intervention to merge this newly created fund—which should have been appropriately called 'INDIA CARES' to begin with—with the PMNRF.

Further, as the delivery of health is primarily the responsibility of state governments, the bulk of this fund should be transferred to the respective states to ensure effective implementation of measures to fight COVID-19.

6. COMMUNALIZATION

Finally, you will appreciate that it is a matter of serious concern that attempts are being made to blame a particular community for the spread of the virus. The organizers of Tabligh were very irresponsible. This, however, cannot be the excuse to target the Muslim community as a whole. Unless stopped this will disrupt the people's united struggle against the Covid pandemic.

You might be in the know that many congregations, religious and otherwise, took place even after the government's orders banning such gatherings came into effect. Even parliament functioned till the eve of the countrywide lockdown being declared. A floor test was held in Madhya Pradesh, a new government was sworn in, encouraging defections. All those who attended such gatherings must be tested forthwith and isolated to contain the further spread of the pandemic.

As the custodian of the Constitution, I hope that you will not allow communal polarization to grow in these trying times when the country needs to be united in its fight against an enemy that does not distinguish on the basis of identities of religion, caste, class, etc. Please impress upon 'your government' that what is needed is human empathy not criminalization.

I beseech you to take these issues with all the seriousness that they merit and the urgency they warrant. Please do direct 'your government' to immediately act on these matters, on, I repeat, a war-footing.

Yours sincerely
Sd/-
(Sitaram Yechury)
General Secretary

CPI(M) General Secretary's Letter to the Prime Minister dated April 25, 2020, on Covid Measures

Dear Pradhan Mantriji,

Unfortunately, I am constrained to write to you once again during this lockdown. My previous communications to you listing out various measures that the central government must undertake to alleviate the sufferings of a vast section of our people during the lockdown have gone unanswered. In fact they have not even been acknowledged, which is unusual.

I am seeking to once again draw your attention to the pressing issues facing the country and the majority of our people.

We are now entering the last week of the forty-day nationwide lockdown that you had announced suddenly and abruptly with a mere four-hour notice. This left both the people and the state governments completely unprepared to meet the grave consequences of the sudden lockdown.

1. *Migrant Workers*: Since the lockdown, the urge among the migrant workers to return to their homes has seen surging crowds in huge numbers seeking to leave for their homes as they have lost all means of livelihood and shelter. This in itself negated one of the objectives of the lockdown, of maintaining physical distancing in order to contain community transmission of the pandemic. Hunger, malnutrition and homelessness continue to plague the lives of crores of our people. Since the announcement of the lockdown we had suggested that the Central government must *immediately provide free food to all the needy*. Huge stocks of foodgrains are rotting in our central godowns. These should be sent to the states for free distribution. Neither of these demands have even been considered by the government with you as the Prime Minister.

2. *Unemployment*: It has been estimated that the absolute number of unemployed rose from 340 lakhs to 880 lakhs between February and April, i.e. an additional 540 lakhs of people lost their

livelihood. In addition, another 680 lakh people have moved out of the labour force. Since the outbreak of the pandemic a staggering 12.2 crores of people have lost their jobs and livelihood. During the six weeks coinciding with the lockdown from early March to April 20, the unemployment rate shot up from 7.5 per cent to 23.6 per cent. *It is imperative that immediately the Central government transfer Rs 7,500 per month for the next three months to all who have lost their livelihoods.* Surely, if a staggering Rs 7.76 lakhs of crores of loans taken by the super-rich and corporates can be waived off by your government during the last five years, there should be no shortage of funds to feed and support the majority of our people.

3. *Cooperative Federalism?:* The states are in the battlefield in combating the pandemic. They require both adequate finances and supplies of foodgrains and other essential commodities. No such support has been forthcoming from the Central government so far in any meaningful manner. A crisis has been created by the rapid announcement of a nationwide lockdown for the migrant workers. You are now asking the state governments to provide shelter, food and maintain physical distancing and other restrictions of the lockdown. This is patently unfair. Even the outstanding dues of the state governments over GST collections have not been paid to them yet. Indeed, *funds must be liberally transferred to the states forthwith.*

4. *Finances:* Thousands of crores of rupees are being collected in a fund by a private trust that bears your name. It has been officially stated that this fund shall not be audited either by the CAG or any other government-appointed auditor. Deductions from salaries of government employees and others are being forcibly transferred to this fund even if they are formally donated to the official Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund. These funds must be immediately deployed to meet the requirements to strengthen the fight against the pandemic.

5. *Stop Wasteful Expenditure:* It is amazing, bordering on criminality, that the Central government plans to continue with

unnecessary wasteful expenditure like its central vista project with a new residence for the Prime Minister and other public relations exercises at the time of financial distress to meet this grave medical emergency. The legacy of this government during the last five years of spending money on statues, bullet trains, propaganda campaigns, etc., instead of public healthcare, education, etc., must be stopped forthwith. The requirements of battling the pandemic must be prioritized.

6. *Grave Shortage of PPEs*: It is universally acknowledged that lockdowns are to be used to aggressively test the people and to provide personal protective equipment to our doctors and health workers so essential to contain and defeat the pandemic. Unfortunately, despite a long lead time that India had compared to many other countries, necessary preparations were not undertaken. Even now after a month of lockdown our testing rates remain one of the lowest in the world, shamefully even lower than Pakistan. Health workers do not have the required PPEs and tragically some have succumbed to the virus. Even at this stage, it is imperative that *equipment for both testing and PPEs must be provided on a war-footing*.

7. *Universal Healthcare*: While the central focus is to battle the Covid pandemic, India cannot afford to see a larger number of non-Covid deaths because of lack of medical attention to those suffering from non-communicable diseases. Reports estimate that more than 3 lakh children and lakhs of pregnant mothers have been deprived of crucial life saving vaccines during the lockdown. More than a lakh cancer patients and 3.5 lakh diabetics have not got the required treatment. Even programmes like Malaria eradication and TB have shown huge decline in the last five weeks. There are reports of huge shortfall in blood supply in blood banks, so crucial for people with blood disorders like thalassemia, haemophilia and sickle cell disease. Surely, such a situation cannot be acceptable and must be corrected forthwith.

8. *Priorities of Governance*: The grave situation of accelerating

of positive cases in states like Madhya Pradesh with huge fatalities are directly connected with the naked lust for political power by the BJP violating all norms at a critical time of a public health emergency. The toppling of an elected government and the swearing in of a BJP government had left the state without any political leadership and the ordinary people are paying the price for this alarming spread of the pandemic.

9. *Dismal Governance*: By now it has become the habit of the Central government to issue orders that cannot be understood, followed by multiple clarifications and even rescinding those orders. We saw the track record of such a dismal governance model when demonetization was undertaken. Clearly, the political executive in the country is proving its incompetence by knee-jerk reactions.

10. *Communal Polarization*: The battle against the pandemic can only succeed when the country and all Indians are united. The irresponsibility of the Tablighi Jamaat organizers cannot be the excuse for targeting the entire Muslim minority community and deepening social divisions and communal polarization. This only undermines India's strength while spreading communal hatred. The impact of such a communal campaign is now being felt in many countries of the world where a large number of people of Indian origin work and reside. It is up to the political leadership, i.e. the Central government, to put a stop to this forthwith. Otherwise it would be the greatest disservice both to the fight against the pandemic and the people of our country.

11. *Return Migrant Workers to their Homes*: The Central government had correctly evacuated a large number of Indians stranded in foreign countries when the pandemic broke out. Special planes were organized to bring them back to India. However, it is impermissible for the Central government not to make any arrangements, if not planes, at least by special trains and buses, maintaining the restrictions of the lockdown, to transport the immigrant workers back to their homes. This must be undertaken at least now.

Further many Indians continue to remain in foreign countries. The Central government must make arrangements for their return like many other countries in the world are doing including airlifting their citizens from our country.

12. Finally, Mr Prime Minister, you have shown a singular disdain to face the media and reply to the concerns of the Indian people, unlike many of your counterparts in the world. Leaders of the government in most countries address regular press conferences and answer questions. This is the only way to remain accountable and to give confidence to the people that the government is both competent and in command of the situation. In fact, many state governments in India do this. The Chief Minister of the LDF government in Kerala holds a daily press briefing and outlines the measures that the government has taken to generate the confidence required for the people to face this challenge. Democratic accountability is grossly missing in your style of governance.

Yours sincerely
Sd/-
(Sitaram Yechury)
General Secretary

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CPI(M) Central Committee's Press Release put out in Public Domain dated May 2, 2020, on the Economic Steps that Needed to be Taken by the Central Government

THE ECONOMIC STEPS NEEDED
IN THE CURRENT PERIOD

The Indian economy was already in the grip of a severe slowdown, bordering on recession, with large-scale fall in production, job

loss, agrarian distress and a steep rise in unemployment on the eve of the outbreak of the Covid pandemic. With this lockdown the situation has worsened and the misery of the people has grown exponentially.

Under these circumstances, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is putting forward an economic plan that needs to be undertaken immediately by the government. The economic crisis and the associated people's agony must be met by measures pertaining to the immediate tasks, medium term measures and the long-term measures. *These three, however, have to be initiated right now.*

The CPI(M) is calling upon the central government to immediately consider these proposals that merit serious attention for our economy and the welfare of our people.

The CPI(M) appeals to all sections of our people, political parties and people's movements to rally together to pressurize this BJP-led Central government to implement the following:

IMMEDIATE MEASURES

1. The immediate problem relates to the fact that millions of working people at present are hungry, unemployed, and without any income; many are herded into quarantine camps. Even if the government's claim that the lockdown has converted the exponential growth in the number of Covid-19 cases into a linear one is accepted, the end of the lockdown is likely to cause a resumption of exponential growth. Whether the lockdown itself is extended further or substituted by some other form of enforced physical distancing, the acute disruption in the lives of these millions will continue. Providing them with succour in the form of food and cash is of immediate priority; and amazingly the central government, after declaring its initial package of Rs1.7 lakh crores which was minuscule and of which nearly half consisted

of re-packaged old schemes anyway, has done literally nothing to help the distressed millions.

2. How long this distress will continue is not known; but to start with, the Central government must make available to every non-income tax paying household Rs 7,500 per month for a period of three months, and to every individual 10 kg of free grains per month for a period of six months. There are 77 million tonnes of foodgrains with the FCI at present against the buffer-cum-operational stock 'norm' of 24 million tonnes; in addition, about 40 million tonnes of Rabi harvest will be added to this amount. So, there are plenty of grains available for distribution, so much so that the government is planning to use rice stocks for producing ethanol. Giving food free to the distressed millions surely has priority over such use. In cases where the recipients have no cooking facility, cooked food can be given in lieu of grain. The nation-wide network of the mid-day meals scheme can be used for this purpose. Apart from cereals a certain amount of pulses, cooking oil and other necessities should also be provided free over this period.

3. The total sum required for such cash and food transfers for the respective periods is estimated to be about 3 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product, on the assumption of a 20 per cent voluntary 'dropout' by the rich from the list of beneficiaries. Raising taxes for this purpose has to be explored later, when a supplementary budget will become necessary. In that budget wealth tax will have to play a crucial role: it will both raise resources and also keep the rapidly increasing wealth inequality in check. Additionally, a tax on the super-rich should also be imposed. But, for the time being, this entire expenditure has to be financed by borrowing from the Reserve Bank of India. This in our view will not create any difficulties for the economy in the present circumstances when vast amounts of unutilized capacity and unsold food stocks exist in the country.

4. While the resources for such transfers have to be provided by the Centre, the actual transfers have to be carried out under the aegis of the state governments. The Centre therefore must make the grain transfers available to the states free, and the cash transfers in the form of grants; their inter se distribution across states is easy to work out since the universality of transfers makes population the only determining criterion. The states in turn would devolve appropriate amounts to the Local Self-Government Institutions whose help will be essential for disbursing the transfers.

5. The state governments would wish to undertake additional expenditure over and above the amount of such transfers. It is amazing that even their GST compensation amounts, solemnly promised by the Centre, have not been paid since August. This amount must be immediately paid. In addition, the borrowing limits of the state governments should be doubled. A pro rata doubling of the borrowing limit of each state should in fact be an immediate step, and they should be allowed to borrow from the central bank rather than the open market. The interest rates on open market auction of state bonds have spiked in recent times, placing a huge burden on the already fiscally beleaguered states. Instead of relying on this route, state bonds must be bought by the RBI at the prevailing repo rate. This is being done in different ways by the US Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank and the Bank of England, as well as several central banks in developing countries. All this must be in addition to the substantial assistance that the Centre must give the state governments from the thousands of crores being collected in the private fund named after the PM for fighting the pandemic and for improving healthcare facilities, e.g. increasing the supplies of ventilators, masks, protective gear, testing equipment, etc.

6. The Central government must immediately guarantee that all the people suffering from serious illness are not deprived of the required medical assistance, while all the necessary measures must be undertaken for fighting the pandemic. Lifesaving vaccinations

for our children and vaccinations for pregnant mothers must be ensured to continue along with our fight against the pandemic. Along with that shortage of drugs, blood, etc., also needs to be addressed on a war-footing.

7. Notwithstanding the assistance that the Centre can give to the states, the state governments which directly face the pandemic will still fall short if they rely only on the public healthcare facilities. It is imperative therefore that private healthcare facilities should be commandeered for public purpose for at least as long as the pandemic lasts, as Spain has done, and people can be tested and treated free at these facilities. The government could also offer to use the services of doctors and staff at reasonable rates. The Supreme Court had made testing in private healthcare facilities free; its retreat from that position is baffling and makes executive intervention absolutely essential. If the Centre, whose unplanned and ill-conceived lockdown has caused acute distress to millions, does not commandeer private healthcare facilities during the crisis, then it would have displayed a shocking class bias, undermining the national solidarity that is badly needed for fighting the pandemic.

8. Immediate measures must be undertaken by the Central government standing guarantee to ensure that there are no job losses and no wage cuts. Special attention must be paid to ensure that the most vulnerable sections—women, particularly, Adivasis, contract and Dalit manual labour—are specially protected. Many countries in the world have announced guarantees, some to the extent of 80 per cent, of the wage bill. This must be announced immediately by the Central government.

9. The logistics of universal transfers will no doubt pose problems. No existing list of beneficiaries can suffice, just as no single existing chain of outlets such as ration shops can be used to reach all. The problem will be more serious in urban compared to rural areas. The distribution of grain may be done using verification with a combination of identity documents (Ration card, Aadhaar

card, Bank passbook, NREGA job card, etc.). In addition, a certain amount of discretion may be allowed to MLAs, heads of village panchayat and municipal ward members to ensure that assistance reaches those who may not have any of these cards. Different state governments are already innovating with different ways of ensuring cash transfers to reach all (with only some exclusion criteria) without necessarily relying on existing beneficiary lists or bank accounts. These have to be expanded.

10. These actions will have to be undertaken at a time when India is facing substantial headwinds from the global economy and our balance of payments is likely to come under pressure. The pandemic has clearly revealed the pitfalls of capitalist globalization. On the one hand, it has made the cross-border transmission of the virus almost as rapid as the cross-border movement of finance. On the other hand the cross-border movement of finance has frightened national governments, including especially the Indian government, into bowing before every caprice of finance, including mindlessly respecting fiscal deficit restrictions even in the midst of the pandemic, and not spending enough to alleviate the distress of millions of working people. But even now, despite the Indian government obeying the dictates of finance and being extremely stingy in the matter of alleviating distress, and even denying the payment of Dearness Allowance to Central government employees, finance is still leaving the country, resulting in a downward slide of the rupee to unprecedented levels against the dollar. Such an exodus of finance is also occurring all over the Third World, though India is somewhat better placed than many other Third World countries in having about half a trillion dollars worth of foreign exchange reserves. If the measures suggested in this note are put in place, then this tendency of finance to flee the country will be greatly strengthened. To cope with this, two steps must immediately be taken. The first is to introduce some degree of direct control on the outflow of finance, since our reserves must not be frittered away in financing capital outflows. The second relates to the issue of a significant amount of

fresh Special Drawing Rights (SDR) by the IMF. Instead of illogically opposing such an issue, as the government has done, India should actively support it. Unlike all loans, including the Swap Lines of the US Federal Reserve Board, the SDRs are non-discriminatory, non-discretionary, interest-free, non-repayable, and do not entail either any 'conditionalities' or any arm-twisting.

MEDIUM-TERM MEASURES

MGNREGS

11. These immediate steps will have to be followed by medium-term measures as the lockdown is slowly lifted. Of these measures, four are central. The first relates to the MGNREGS. In most states MGNREGS has come to a virtual halt. Work under MGNREGS has to be revived, so that when the cash transfers suggested above have run out, the labourers, including those immigrant workers who have returned to their villages because of the lockdown and are without any income at the moment, can find some means of livelihood. Four measures are crucial with regard to employment guarantee. First, the wage arrears that have got built up must be paid immediately. Second, to accommodate the returned migrants from the towns, anyone demanding work, not just those who have been registered with the scheme in the past, should be offered employment on demand. MGNREGS must be extended to wage and family labour used by small and medium farmers in the current crop season. Third, the offer of 100 days of employment should not be limited to households but should be extended to every adult; and unemployment allowance must be paid, as provided in the Act, in cases where employment cannot be provided. And fourth, MGNREGS should be extended to the urban areas where employment under the urban scheme could include employment in small enterprises, especially those supplying essential goods and services. This would be a way of subsidizing small enterprises: the government in effect would be paying for a certain period the

wage-bill of the small enterprises. This would be a way of slowly reviving these enterprises by both supplying labour to them and doing so without their having to pay for it.

MSMEs

12. The second medium-term measure relates specifically to the MSMEs and to agriculture. Supplying labour from an urban employment guarantee scheme to these enterprises will not be enough. They will require substantial additional support. The banks have to give them timely credit without demanding high collateral security, for which the government has to provide credit guarantee. Besides, the RBI's moratorium on loans should be extended for such enterprises from the stipulated three-month period to one year. Since the sudden stop or steep fall in demand makes it difficult for many of these enterprises to survive till normalcy returns, there is also need for an extended grace period, as well as a subvention that covers all of the interest rate from the government. In the case of agriculture there has to be a debt waiver for the peasants and the provision of fresh credit at an interest rate covered by the government. In addition a subsidy of Rs 5 per litre of milk to dairy co-operatives is essential to help dairy farmers and to revive the demand for milk.

Return of Migrant Workers

13. The third medium-term measure would be to encourage the migrants who have gone back to their villages (and their going back to their villages has to be immediately facilitated by running trains and buses, which India's ruthless lockdown has prevented, unlike in almost every other country), to return to their places of work. This will take time and will not be easy, because the shadow of the disease and the scare of a repeat lockdown will haunt everyone for a very long time. The fears of the migrant workers have to be allayed; and the image of a humane government, as distinct from one like our present government that takes whimsical decisions

and implements them using police batons, has to be established.

Arrangements must be made to facilitate the return of such migrants, who want to, from foreign countries.

Supply of Essential Goods

14. The fourth medium-term measure relates to ensuring stable, adequate and continuous supply of essential goods and other items of mass consumption at reasonable prices. The lockdown has already broken supply chains and disabled production of several essential goods and services in multiple ways. Reviving these will require specific and co-ordinated efforts of Central and state governments, bearing in mind the input-output relations that govern such production. This therefore requires the effective reinstatement of some planning mechanism across the country.

Reviving Village Economy

15. The fifth medium-term measure would be the starting of small panchayat-owned village-level enterprises in a number of fields, such as processing local products. Notwithstanding all efforts and assurances, many returned-migrant workers are going to stay on in rural areas and employment opportunities for them have to be found outside of and in addition to MGNREGS. Infrastructural facilities for cold storage preservation and marketing must be provided to boost agribusiness activities. This would be a way of reviving the village economy and giving an alternative thrust to the trajectory of development in an employment-intensive direction. Bank credit has to be made available for this purpose, together with expert technical and managerial advice which the state governments can arrange.

LONG-TERM MEASURES

Hike Public Investments

16. We now come to the long-term measures, though these too

will have to be initiated now. It will be necessary to re-orient the economy's growth strategy on the basis of the internal market and hence upon agricultural growth which ultimately determines the growth of this market. Agriculture has been neglected throughout the recent period, and yet, as the lockdown has demonstrated, for millions of people agriculture remains the last refuge. This neglect of agriculture must be reversed, through a host of steps, such as the provision of remunerative procurement prices, the extension of procurement operations to cash crops as used to be the case earlier, the use of tariffs to insulate domestic prices from world price fluctuations, research into new yield-raising practices, the development of less water-intensive varieties, and the distribution of ceiling surplus land to the landless, starting with plantations that have unused land. Raising per capita agricultural incomes of the peasants and agricultural labourers holds the key to breaking the stranglehold of poverty on India's working masses.

In addition, non-agricultural activities must be promoted with a clear eye on their ecological sustainability and their capacity for employment generation. This means a much greater emphasis on 'green' production and on expanding the provision of care services.

This fight against the pandemic has clearly shown the severe limitations of the healthcare system in the country. Urgent efforts must be made to establish a universal healthcare system by spending at least 3 per cent of our GDP by the Central government. The state governments will have to add on to these amounts in creating this system. The rate of CGST on medicines must be reduced and public infrastructure for self-reliance in domestic production of medicines must be strengthened. Substantial investment in education, particularly, universalization of school education, has also to be concurrently done. This should increase to at least six per cent of our GDP by the Central government.

*Physical Distancing, Social Solidarity
Shun Polarization & Authoritarian Attacks*

17. The pandemic is a time for all to come together. Forging a new national unity is the real ultimate panacea for the pandemic. Communalizing the pandemic with the implicit support of the government, using this very time to incarcerate those fighting for civil liberties and against measures like the CAA under draconian laws like the UAPA, attacking the freedom of the press by targeting journalists who are critical of the government, are all part of an authoritarian agenda. They are precisely the opposite of what is needed at this or at any other time; and yet they are being pushed under the cover of the lockdown. Unless this is reversed, our country and people cannot fight the pandemic effectively.

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The Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) met online, for the first time, on July 25–26, 2020. Below we are reproducing the operative part from the Press Communique issued on July 27, 2020, after the Central Committee meeting held on July 25–26, 2020

CENTRAL COMMITTEE DEMANDS

The Central Committee, under these circumstances, has put forward the following essential demands before the Central government:

1. Immediate cash transfer of Rs 7,500 per month for the next six months to all families outside the income tax bracket.
2. Immediate distribution of free foodgrains of 10 kg per individual per month for the next six months for all the needy.
3. Expand MGNREGA to ensure at least 200 days of work a year with enhanced wages. Promulgate an Urban Employment

Guarantee Act. Announce unemployment allowance to all the unemployed.

4. Scrap the proposal to repeal the Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment & Conditions of Services) Act, 1979 and, on the contrary, strengthen the Act.

5. Increase Central expenditure on public health to at least 3 per cent of the GDP.

6. Scrap the ordinances that remove the Essential Commodities Act and amend the APMC Act to allow free movement of foodgrains across states on the basis of unregulated pricing.

7. Withdraw all proposals to abolish/amend/suspend existing labour laws.

8. Scrap privatization of public sector undertakings, especially Indian railways and in electricity, petroleum, coal, banks/insurance, defence production sectors.

9. Transfer all funds collected in a private trust fund bearing the PM's name to the states which are in the forefront of combating the pandemic.

10. As the Disaster Management Act has been invoked for combating the pandemic, announce a one-time financial assistance to the families of victims who succumbed to the pandemic in accordance with the National Disaster Relief Fund provisions.

11. Strictly implement reservations for SC/ST/OBCs & disabled. Fill up all backlog posts.

12. Examine and award degrees to the final year graduate and post-graduate students on the basis of their previous semesters' performance.

13. Immediately release all those who have been detained since August 2019 in Jammu & Kashmir. Restore full communications and allow free movement of people.

14. Release all political prisoners in jails detained under draconian laws like UAPA, NSA, Sedition Act.

15. Withdraw Environment Impact Assessment 2020.

16. Punish the perpetrators of growing caste violence

against Dalits, domestic and sexual violence against women and exploitation of the tribals.

CENTRAL COMMITTEE CALLS

1. Highlighting this demand charter, the Central Committee has called upon all units of the Party to *observe a protest week from August 20 to 26* all over the country adhering to the required restrictions and precautions.

2. The Central Committee extends the Party's support and solidarity to the call for an all-India protest action given by the trade unions, the kisan sabhas and the agricultural labour unions on August 9, 2020.

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