

New Zealand government warns tens of thousands could die, imposes lockdown

Tom Peters
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On Monday, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a partial lockdown, moving to a complete lockdown of non-essential businesses and services from 11:59pm on Wednesday. Schools will then shut down entirely, after being closed to most students from today.

The measures will increase New Zealand's COVID-19 alert system from level 3 to level 4, the highest level, on Thursday, in an attempt to slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus. All workers except those in essential services will be required to self-isolate by staying home, except to go to the supermarket or go for a walk.

Currently the lockdown is scheduled to last for four weeks, but this could be extended if the virus continues to spread. As of today, there are 152 confirmed cases, with four thought to be the result of community transmission rather than from overseas. Five people with the virus are in hospital.

Announcing the lockdown, Ardern warned: "If community transmission takes off in New Zealand the number of cases will double every five days. If that happens unchecked, our health system will be inundated, and tens of thousands New Zealanders will die."

The prime minister said "we must stop that happening, and we can... we have a window of opportunity to contain the virus, to stop it multiplying and to protect New Zealanders from the worst."

The sudden announcement created confusion and panic buying at supermarkets, despite government assurances that these would remain open. Thousands of workers in tourism, retail and other industries have lost their jobs in recent weeks due to the pandemic-induced economic crisis and will have to survive on poverty-level unemployment benefits during the lockdown.

The lockdown is a necessary but far from sufficient

measure to contain the virus. The World Health Organisation has urged all countries to carry out mass testing of all people who may have been exposed.

The government's own COVID-19 alert system calls for "intensive testing" at level 1, but this has not taken place. There have been reports of symptomatic individuals being denied tests. There may well be many more undetected cases.

As of Monday only 6,000 people had been tested. The government last week acknowledged that there is a shortage of test kits, with only 30,000 swabs (which are components of tests) in the country.

The lockdown, particularly the closure of schools, should have happened sooner. The government first announced two cases of suspected community transmission on Saturday. But a lockdown was only announced after significant pressure from doctors, healthcare workers, teachers and other workers.

On Monday a petition signed by over 3,000 doctors and health workers calling for an immediate lockdown was handed to the government. It was supported by two online petitions with a total of over 150,000 signatures.

Petition organiser Dr Kelvin Ward, from Wellington hospital, told the media on Sunday: "It's not hyperbolic to say we have only hours to prevent the inevitable horrors we see in countries that waited too long. At the rate we are going, we will look like Italy and the US—running out of medical supplies, turning patients away, Kiwis dying needlessly, because we are over capacity."

Today, Ward told Radio NZ he was "extremely grateful" for the lockdown, but added that a strict quarantine should be considered for positive COVID-19 cases, with patients moved to special facilities. At present, the vast majority of cases, apart from those in hospital, are being told to self-isolate at

home. Some experts fear this will not be enough to prevent transmission to others.

Opposition to shutting schools earlier came from the trade unions, which have acted as an adjunct of the government and praised its decisions since the onset of the coronavirus crisis.

On Sunday, the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) denounced the doctors' lockdown petition. Spokesperson Hilary Graham-Smith told *Newshub* that the growing number of signatures was "disappointing." She declared that the government "hasn't let us down so far and I think that they will make the right decisions at the right time and we just need to trust that."

The Post-Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and New Zealand Educational Institute opposed school closures until Monday morning. In a YouTube video on March 19, PPTA vice-president Melanie Webber ignorantly declared, "schools are safe places." In fact, many classrooms are overcrowded and there is a lack of cleaning staff, hand sanitiser and other basic equipment.

Webber echoed the government's self-serving argument that "children under 14 have to be supervised by an adult and if the schools were closed nationwide it will cause widespread disruption to the community."

On Saturday, in a PPTA members' Facebook group, union representative Chris Abercrombie denounced teachers advocating a strike. "I just think calling for industrial action during a national emergency would be classed as alarmist language," he wrote.

The unions' position prompted angry comments on social media. One person wrote in a teachers' Facebook group: "Where is the union on this? Not representing their members that's for sure... Are we all expendable? The assurances by school managers and their masters in the Ministry are obvious nonsense—pedalled from the comfort of their own homes." He denounced the excuse for keeping schools open—that there was no proven community transmission of the virus—as "frankly, an insult to people's intelligence."

In media interviews today, Ardern warned that "things will get worse before they get better," as more New Zealanders return from overseas with the virus. There could also be more cases discovered in the community.

Despite the government's assurances, the risk

remains that the health system, which only has 180 intensive care unit beds, may be overwhelmed. Should this happen, the government will undoubtedly seek to blame ordinary people for failing to obey instructions about self-isolation.

The crisis, however, highlights the criminal failure to prepare by successive governments, despite repeated warnings of a possible pandemic. While the Ministry of Health claims it can "triple" the number of ICU beds "immediately," the units are understaffed and under-resourced after more than a decade of austerity. A survey last year by the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists found that about 90 percent of ICUs said they needed "significantly more" staff.

The unions have acted as enforcers of austerity. In 2018 the NZNO forced through a sellout deal that failed to meet nurses' demands for a guaranteed ratio of one nurse to four patients. The union echoed the Labour Party-led government's claim that there was not enough money to resolve the crisis in hospitals.

This has been exposed as a lie, with the government last week announcing more than \$9 billion in tax cuts and subsidies to prop up businesses affected by the crisis. The Reserve Bank has revealed up to \$30 billion may be spent on quantitative easing measures to assist the banks. Just \$500 million was announced for the public health system last week.



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