

Workers remain at risk during New Zealand's COVID-19 lockdown

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's total confirmed and probable COVID-19 cases reached 451 today, an almost nine-fold increase in seven days. Twelve people are in hospital and two are in intensive care. No deaths have been reported, to this point. Most cases are linked to overseas travel, but there are also cases of community transmission and there could be many undetected cases.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the media she expected NZ's cases to increase sharply for at least the next 10 days. A nationwide four-week lockdown began on Thursday, with schools and most businesses closed and "non-essential" workers instructed to remain home.

The lockdown, imposed after petitions from medical professionals, supported by tens of thousands of workers, is necessary to prevent a catastrophe. Auckland University modeling shows that without such measures the virus could infect 89 percent of the population, overwhelm the underfunded health system and kill as many as 80,000 people.

In the best-case scenario, the number of deaths could be lowered to about 20. Researchers have warned that achieving this goal requires a strict lockdown, contact tracing, quarantines and travel restrictions, most likely lasting much longer than four weeks.

Like its counterparts internationally, the Labour Party-led government's priority is to defend the interests of big business. Multi-billion dollar subsidies, tax cuts and loans have been announced, including a \$900 million loan to Air New Zealand even as it lays off thousands of workers—all with the support of the trade union bureaucracy. The Reserve Bank has promised to make up to \$30 billion (equal to 10 percent of gross domestic product) available for financial markets through quantitative easing.

These enormous sums dwarf the \$500 million injection into the severely underfunded healthcare

system, and the miserly \$25 a week increase to unemployment benefits and pensions.

The state of emergency declared on March 25 is being used to test authoritarian forms of rule. Police have been given broad powers, including the ability to enter homes to enforce self-isolation rules. The military has been placed on standby.

With the agreement of the opposition National Party, parliament was suspended on Thursday until April 28 and replaced with a smaller cross-party committee. All parties in parliament put their campaigns for the September election on hold and pledged support for the government. Some media commentators are suggesting that the election could be postponed, as happened during World Wars I and II.

These measures, accepted by the unions, pseudo-lefts and liberal pundits, go well beyond what is needed to enforce the lockdown. The state is preparing to confront working-class opposition to the worsening economic crisis, attacks on living standards, and the appalling state of the public health system that has been sharply exposed by the pandemic.

Gross domestic product is widely expected to fall up to 10 percent in the second quarter of 2020, with hundreds of thousands of job losses. Shamubeel Eaqub from Sense Partners compared the crisis with the 1930s Great Depression. He told Radio NZ that unemployment could rise from 4 percent to 15 or even 30 percent. During the 1930s, governments used emergency measures to suppress demonstrations by unemployed workers.

Already thousands of workers in the forestry, tourism, hospitality, retail and other industries have been laid off, due to the shutdown of markets and supply chains throughout the world.

Workers who have for now kept their jobs could face

savage wage cuts. Employers receiving the “wage subsidy” of \$585 a week per full-time worker, or \$350 per part-time worker, are required to pass it on, but do not have to top up the payments to a liveable income.

Workers in industries deemed essential are being placed at risk. A 28-year-old New World supermarket worker with asthma told Radio NZ yesterday that he walked off his shift. Articulating the views of thousands, he said: “I just didn’t feel safe... I know there are a lot of workers around me in the same situation. There are workers with families, with kids, who have had surgeries or are immuno-compromised, and are still working.”

Workers for Sistema, a plastic container factory in Auckland, walked out on Wednesday to protest the lack of social distancing and other protective measures. Sistema management had initially claimed to be an essential service but, following the strike and a subsequent inspection by the regulator WorkSafe, the plant will close for four weeks with workers receiving full pay during the shutdown.

Numerous factories have been allowed to remain open, including Imperial Tobacco’s cigarette factory in Wellington. A spokesperson for the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation told the media the decision was “outrageous,” particularly “given the emerging evidence that COVID-19 infections may be more severe among smokers.”

The *Otago Daily Times* reported yesterday that workers at Alliance’s meat processing factory in Oamaru felt like “cannon fodder” due to inadequate precautions. An anonymous *Change.org* petition calling for all meat processing factories to be shut gained more than 2,600 signatures this week.

One comment on the petition stated: “I’m signing as my son has lung issues and I want to keep him safe.” Another said: “Lives are more important than profit.”

Another wrote that workers at their factory “are not supplied with masks, many carpool with others outside their isolation group & have been told that if they can’t go to work because they haven’t got alternative transport, that’s their problem.”

One worker explained: “There is absolutely no way we can keep a safe distance from one another, there are far too many variables out at the meatworks and a perfect breeding ground for this virus to spread quickly.”

The Meat Workers Union has asked that workers be allowed to stay home if they feel unsafe, but did not endorse the petition. The union is working with the Meat Industry Association and the government to ensure that factories remain open during the lockdown.

Many healthcare workers still lack basic personal protective equipment (PPE) despite the government claiming there are enough masks, gowns and goggles. District Health Boards (DHBs) have a thoroughly disorganised response to the pandemic.

One nurse wrote yesterday in the Facebook group “New Zealand, please hear our voice”: “My DHB has just informed me that we are not allowed to wear masks for direct patient contact, only if the patient is symptomatic.”

Caregivers who work with elderly and disabled people have also reported inadequate PPE. “This is a prime route of transmission of COVID-19,” one worker told *Newsroom* yesterday, “Thousands of support workers going through goodness knows how many tens of thousands of homes every day.”

Radio NZ reported yesterday that NZ Post courier drivers in Wellington said they did not have sufficient PPE and hand sanitiser, and up to 100 people must share a few, unsanitary toilets.



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