

New Zealand government moves to end lockdown

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced yesterday that the government will ease its COVID-19 lockdown measures next Tuesday, April 28, five days later than originally planned, but sooner than some experts had advised.

Nearly one month ago the government imposed level 4 restrictions (the top level in its COVID-19 alert system), closing schools and requiring most “non-essential” workers to stay home. Next week this will be reduced to level 3, meaning manufacturing, construction and forestry businesses, and many smaller enterprises, will be allowed to restart. An estimated 500,000 more people will return to workplaces and schools will partially reopen.

The decision is calculated to appease businesses, which had called for the lockdown to be lifted immediately. Right-wing commentators internationally have argued that society must accept a “trade-off” between workers’ health and the economy, i.e., profits for big business. Ardern emphasised that the five-day delay to lifting level 4 restrictions will cost only two business days.

The announcement that New Zealand will reopen large parts of its economy, despite new COVID-19 cases being announced each day, will be presented in the corporate media as an example for other countries to follow.

The Ardern government’s pro-business response to the pandemic has been glorified internationally. On April 19 the *Atlantic* hailed Ardern’s “leadership style, focused on empathy,” saying she “may be the most effective leader on the planet.” The *Financial Times* went even further, calling Ardern a “saint.” There have been similar statements from CNN, BBC, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post* and other outlets.

The reason for this avalanche of praise is that, far

from being based on “empathy,” the Labour Party-led government’s main response to the pandemic has been to spend tens of billions of dollars bailing out businesses and the financial markets. To prop up capitalism, this wealth must ultimately be extracted from working people through intensified exploitation and austerity.

Already, tens of thousands of workers have been sacked and others have suffered wage cuts of 20 percent or more under the government’s “wage subsidy” scheme for businesses.

Speaking with TVNZ last night, Finance Minister Grant Robertson acknowledged that some experts had called for a longer lockdown, but the government had “considered economic matters” as well as public health. Ardern told Radio NZ (RNZ) today: “The longer you stay in lockdown the more likely you are to give yourself the best chance of success. That has to be traded against the huge economic impact and the toll on livelihoods.”

New Zealand has reported a total of 1,445 cases of COVID-19, with 14 new cases in the last two days. Thirteen people have died from the virus. Four percent of cases are classed as community transmission, with their source unknown.

University of Auckland professor Shaun Hendy, who provided modelling data to the government, told RNZ yesterday the level 4 lockdown should be extended for two more weeks. “We can’t right at the moment say we’ve eliminated the disease; we’re still seeing cases daily and we’d really need to see those cases drop down to zero,” he said. Hendy added that the reproduction rate for the virus was likely to go up under level 3.

Another government advisor, epidemiologist Michael Baker told TVNZ today: “The modelling work says it

would be good to stay in lockdown a couple more weeks just to improve our chance of wiping out the virus—but we have got to get people back in work.” He described the five-day extension as a “difficult trade-off,” but hoped that keeping level 3 restrictions for two weeks would be enough to extinguish the virus.

Speaking to RNZ, Baker posed the question: “Why did New Zealand allow its public health infrastructure to get to such a poor point?” He pointed to “many warnings” about the lack of preparation for a pandemic, including the 2016 Havelock North water contamination crisis and last year’s measles epidemic, which spread from New Zealand to Samoa.

New Zealand public hospitals are drastically underfunded, with severe shortages of nurses, doctors and other staff, and rationing of personal protective equipment. Despite the level 4 lockdown, there have been positive cases of COVID-19 reported among healthcare workers, supermarket workers, aged care residents and staff, and at least one meat processing worker.

There is considerable anxiety among workers about the ending of restrictions, especially the move to reopen schools. An online petition to Ardern, started by a teacher and signed by nearly 35,000 people, calls for “no schools or ECE [early childhood education] centres to open during alert level 3.”

The petition points out that it is impossible to enforce social distancing among young children, as is required under level 3 for other workplaces. The *New Zealand Herald* reports that “the Early Childhood Council, whose 1300 childcare services have about 65,000 of the 200,000 children enrolled... is still recommending that its centres should stay closed because of the risk of spreading the coronavirus.”

To justify the reopening of schools, the government’s director-general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield told the media: “Children and teens tend to have low infection rates and they don’t become as unwell if they do get infected, and they don’t tend to pass the virus on to adults.”

Such statements distort the scientific evidence. While most children do not develop symptoms, they can easily contract and spread COVID-19.

Rod Jackson, an epidemiologist at the University of Auckland, told the *New Zealand Herald* schools should remain closed because there were likely to be

undetected cases in the community which could be spread by children. He pointed out that NZ’s biggest COVID-19 cluster is centred around Marist College, where adults and children tested positive.

International research suggests that children are acting as carriers for the virus without being detected, due to the lack of testing. A study published on April 16 in the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* estimated that for every one child hospitalised in the US with a severe case of COVID-19, 2,318 others could be infected. The authors predicted the number of children hospitalised could soar if nothing is done to stop the spread.

For the ruling class, however, the reopening of schools is vital in order to send hundreds of thousands of parents back to work, regardless of the risk to health and lives.

The union bureaucracy is working closely with the government and big business to suppress opposition to this agenda. The Post-Primary Teachers’ Association and the New Zealand Educational Institute have not endorsed the petition to keep schools closed. The unions, which opposed calls for schools to be closed prior to the government announcing its level 4 lockdown, issued statements yesterday welcoming the reopening.



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