

New Zealand teachers and nurses oppose easing of lockdown

Tom Peters
24 April 2020

There is unease and opposition among teachers and health workers to the Labour Party-led government's decision to ease New Zealand's pandemic-related restrictions, allowing schools and many businesses to reopen next week.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced on Monday that the strict alert level 4 lockdown that began a month ago will drop to level 3 on April 28, five days later than originally planned, but earlier than some experts recommended. Scientist Shaun Hendy called for a two-week extension of level 4, while Rod Jackson, an epidemiologist at the University of Auckland, supported keeping schools closed under level 3. *Stuff* reported on April 18 that a poll of more than 72,000 people found over 60 percent in favour of remaining in level 4 for an extra two weeks. An online petition for schools and early childhood centres to remain closed under level 3 now has more than 38,000 signatures.

The government is gambling with the lives and health of the population. New cases of COVID-19 are still being reported each day. The country has had a total of 1,451 cases and 16 deaths. Jackson has estimated there could be up to 500 undetected cases.

Ardern stated that the health benefits of a longer lockdown had to be "traded against" the harm to the economy. In every country the ruling elites are demanding the resumption of work to prop up businesses and the financial system, which have received trillions in government bailouts even as ordinary people have suffered job losses and wage cuts.

The government says families should keep children at home during level 3 if possible. Writing in the *New Zealand Herald*, however, Kaye Brunton, principal of Ngāti Toa School, said while wealthier parents could often work from home, "many of our parents' financial

situations will mean they won't have any choice but to send their kids to us."

The decision to reopen schools has been justified with questionable claims by Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield, echoed by Education Minister Chris Hipkins, that children "don't tend to" catch the virus or spread it to adults.

Across New Zealand, 10.2 percent of confirmed and probable cases are in people aged under 19, with about half of those aged under 15.

The US Centres for Disease Control states that children are likely playing a role in transmission and spread of COVID-19. In New York City, more than 60 school staff have been killed by the virus. In New Zealand, the second-largest cluster of COVID-19 cases is centred around Marist College in Auckland, with 93 people infected, including children and adults.

The government's present claims also contradict its previous statements.

A review of evidence published by the Ministry of Health on April 13, which outlined the reasons for keeping schools closed under level 4 restrictions, had taken note of only a single "non-peer reviewed" Japanese study which claimed that school closures "did not reduce cases." By contrast, it stated that modelling from Singapore, China and the UK indicated school closures were an effective means in controlling the spread of the virus.

In the Facebook group "I back the teachers!" one person said she "almost literally fainted" hearing Bloomfield's justification for reopening schools. "I just wish he could look at examples from other countries like Taiwan, where PPE [personal protective equipment] is recommended to all at school, and Hong Kong, where schools have been closed since January."

A teacher said social distancing would be impossible

to implement: “Try telling a 5-year-old they cannot touch each other and must be 2 meters away... not humanly possible. Does this mean teachers are a disposable commodity[?]” She added that “many of our teaching staff are over 60,” meaning that they are at greater risk from coronavirus.

A video on the Ministry of Education Facebook page, in which Bloomfield insisted there was a “very, very low” chance of COVID-19 cases emerging in schools, attracted hundreds of angry comments.

Cheryl asked: “Why was the Marist [College] cluster so large if children don’t pass on Covid-19?” No explanation was given.

Angela wrote: “You are still not providing the evidence that children don’t ‘tend’ to pass it on. Would you pick up an infected child (as we will need to) and comfort them and assure us that we won’t catch it?”

The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) and Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA), which both opposed calls for the closure of schools before it was announced by the government, are now seeking to suppress opposition to the reopening. An April 20 statement by the NZEI said the union was “eagerly anticipating further detailed guidance from the Ministry of Education to help schools and centres prepare for some children to return on 29 April.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a nurse in Christchurch, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid negative repercussions. *Newshub* reported on April 22 that health workers have been “warned they could face disciplinary action for going public” about conditions in hospitals.

The nurse said the government “chose business concerns over expert advice. I’m sure another two weeks at level 4 and we could have eliminated [the virus], but we have thrown that chance away. My work has been pretty much told it’s business as usual next week. Hospitals opening is just ridiculous. There’s been a hundred and something nurses who have caught [the virus].”

Hospitals deferred non-urgent operations and barred visitors under level 4, but these restrictions will be loosened under level 3. Hospitals could become much more crowded, raising the risk of transmission. At least 128 health workers have reportedly been infected with COVID-19.

Despite government claims that there is plenty of PPE available, District Health Boards (DHBs) are restricting its use, placing staff and patients in danger. “The government’s completely out of touch with the way these DHBs run, they’ve got no idea... it’s being rationed,” the nurse said.

In the nurses’ Facebook group “New Zealand, please hear our voice,” several comments have denounced Canterbury DHB’s attempt to blame nurses at Burwood Hospital, who tested positive for the virus, for misusing PPE.

An anonymous post said 20 patients transferred to Burwood for isolation “had all been exposed to other patients or staff who had tested positive to the virus... Those nurses should have had access to full PPE during transfer, and from the moment the patients arrived in Burwood, and until at least two weeks had passed with no symptoms. They did not... How dare the DHB suggest that staff are to blame for not using PPE properly.”

The severe under-resourcing and under-staffing in hospitals by successive Labour and National Party governments, enforced by the trade unions, has left them completely unprepared to deal with significant outbreaks of the virus.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact