

New Zealand government removes more COVID-19 restrictions

Tom Peters
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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced on Monday that the country will remove most of its remaining lockdown restrictions on Thursday, allowing almost all businesses to reopen. Once again, the Labour Party-led government is brushing aside calls from scientists for the lockdown to be further extended.

The country has recorded 21 deaths from coronavirus and a total of 1,497 confirmed and probable cases. This is much lower than the appalling death tolls seen in the US and Europe. However, new cases are being reported nearly every day, raising the possibility of a resurgence of the disease.

South Korea, China and Germany recently reported significant new outbreaks after easing restrictions. In Australia, the government is telling the population to expect more cases of the virus as it proceeds recklessly to reopen the economy.

New Zealand will drop from alert level 3 to 2 in the government's four-level system of COVID-19 alerts. Schools and early childhood centres will reopen on May 18, if they haven't already, to enable the vast majority of people to return to work. Although schools officially reopened on April 29, after the strict level 4 lockdown was lifted, a number of scientists and thousands of teachers opposed the decision. Large numbers of parents kept their children at home, and many early childhood centres refused to open due to the ongoing health risk.

Tomorrow, most businesses will be allowed to reopen, with some social distancing requirements. Gatherings of more than 10 people are still banned. Shopping malls, cafes, restaurants and gyms will open, but bars will remain closed for an extra week, with Ardern saying they "posed the most risk" for spreading the virus. The government rejected advice from the

Ministry of Health to keep bars closed for two weeks.

Microbiologist Dr Siouxsie Wiles told *Newstalk ZB* on Sunday: "I would like to see us be at level 3 for another week" because it was unclear whether the level 3 restrictions have effectively suppressed the virus. She said while daily case numbers were low, there could still be silent transmission of the virus among asymptomatic people.

Infectious diseases specialist Professor David Murdoch told *Stuff* there was "concern" that the drop in levels would encourage "some complacency," when "more than ever it's a time to be vigilant."

University of Otago epidemiologist Dr Michael Baker told *Newstalk ZB* on May 11 that the government should "pause a few more days" at level 3. Baker has urged the government to release more data to show the origin of new cases of COVID-19, including how many are from overseas and from healthcare settings.

Baker has also called for facemasks to be made compulsory on public transport, something the government has rejected.

Another government advisor, Professor Shaun Hendy from Auckland University, told the *Spinoff* that "we haven't ruled out that there could still be undetected chains of transmission." This may have increased following the drop to level 3, which allowed hundreds of thousands of people to return to work. "My gut reaction is we should go a bit longer in level three. Probably add another week," he said.

The government has refused to be swayed by such concerns because its priority is not public health, but rather the profit interests of big business. Its main response to the pandemic has been to hand out tens of billions of dollars to businesses in the form of subsidies, bailouts and tax cuts. With the assistance of the trade unions, major corporations have sacked

thousands of workers and slashed wages, even while receiving government money.

Charities and social service providers are pleading for increased welfare payments and housing assistance, as unemployment is expected to soar well above 10 percent. The government will announce its annual budget tomorrow.

Government ministers, however, have warned that “generations” of workers will have to pay back the debt being incurred by the state due to the worst crisis of capitalism since the 1930s. Finance Minister Grant Robertson told a business audience on May 7 that spending in many areas would be “slowed or postponed” or put “on ice.”

Meanwhile, there are many warnings that a new outbreak of COVID-19 could occur. According to the Ministry of Health there are 12 clusters of 10 or more cases where there is potentially ongoing transmission, including four aged care facilities.

The country’s second-largest cluster, with 95 cases, centres around Marist College in Auckland, raising concerns that schools could become centres for the spread of disease once students return.

Auckland medical school associate professor Matire Harwood told Radio NZ that poor areas in the country’s largest city would be at greater risk of a flare-up of the virus, due to overcrowded housing and homelessness.

Over 150 healthcare workers have contracted COVID-19. Nurses have spoken out about inconsistent procedures in hospitals, which have put staff and patients at risk.

A *Newsroom* report on May 12 described Waitakere Hospital in Auckland as “a cluster waiting to happen.” Seven nurses and at least three close contacts have tested positive for the virus, but the article said “authorities [had] repeatedly tried to downplay concerns.”

Staff expressed alarm at being made to work in both COVID and non-COVID hospital wards, increasing the chances of transmission. The Waitemata District Health Board (DHB) waited four days after the first nurse tested positive before making a public statement on May 1, by which point two others were confirmed to have the virus.

Contrary to assertions from the DHB that adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) was provided, one

nurse told *Newsroom* that nurses working with coronavirus patients “were told to wear ordinary surgical masks, which are known to be inadequate protection against COVID-19 in close nursing situations.” There is no national protocol on the use of PPE, with each hospital essentially making its own rules.

Such cases highlight that the health system, which has been starved of funding and resources for decades by Labour Party and National Party governments, is completely unprepared to deal with a major outbreak of COVID-19.



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