

New Zealand government lifts all COVID-19 restrictions

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand government lifted all remaining COVID-19 social distancing measures on June 9, allowing workplaces and public facilities to operate without taking any special precautions. Limits on crowd sizes have also been removed.

On June 8, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government reported that there were no active cases of COVID-19 in the country. New Zealand has recorded 22 deaths from the coronavirus, and another 1,482 cases of people who have recovered. No new cases have been detected since May 22.

Ardern's Labour Party-led government is being widely hailed in the international media for having "eliminated" the virus, in contrast countries such as the US where governments are forcing a return to work even as cases continue to soar.

In an article for the *Conversation*, public health experts Michael Baker and Nick Wilson said modeling by the Universities of Otago and Auckland shows there is more than 95 percent likelihood that there is no virus left in New Zealand.

The only way to be certain that the virus is stamped out, however, would be mass testing of the population. Although the government is encouraging people with mild symptoms to be tested, scientists internationally estimate as many as half of all COVID-19 carriers are asymptomatic. New Zealand has tested only about 6 percent of its population (312,648 people). At present there are only enough test kits for another 296,667 people, according to the Ministry of Health.

Even if New Zealand is free from the virus, Baker and Wilson warned that with the pandemic continuing to rage throughout the world, New Zealand remains at risk of a second wave.

Businesses are demanding that New Zealand reopen its border with Australia, where state governments are

lifting restrictions and reopening schools even though the virus has not been suppressed. The Ardern government has already appeased businesses by lifting lockdown restrictions in April and May earlier than public health experts recommended, in order to send people back to work.

To prepare for future outbreaks, Wilson and Baker pleaded for "an urgent overhaul of the health system, including the establishment of a new national public health agency for disease prevention and control." They also called for the mandatory use of facemasks on public transport and airlines.

Wilson told Radio NZ on June 10 that New Zealand's contact-tracing systems were "way behind" countries like Taiwan or South Korea. "We're reliant on manual tracing systems and a pretty low-quality app," he said. He called for a royal commission of inquiry into the pandemic and an "upgrade" to public health services "which have been run down for decades."

The health system would be quickly swamped if another outbreak is not contained. The *New Zealand Herald* reported on May 28 that the country's 12 regional public health units, which are responsible for disease control, have an annual budget of \$440 million, which is \$80 million less than 10 years ago.

A letter to Ardern signed by 50 public health experts, dated May 4, states that "the COVID-19 response has exposed an extremely concerning reality—that there is a massive and hugely problematic shortfall in New Zealand's public health investment."

A stock take of hospital infrastructure released this week found that \$14 billion is needed over the next decade to fix problems with buildings including operating theatres, intensive care units (ICUs) and emergency departments. Dozens of buildings are in

“poor” or “very poor” condition. Six out of 10 ICUs assessed did not have up-to-standard negative pressure rooms, used to isolate COVID-19 patients. Some rooms had doors with inadequate seals.

The media reported on June 12 that St John Ambulance service, which is funded through charitable donations and partially by the government, is in severe financial trouble. Chief executive Peter Bradley told staff the service needed to save \$30 million and “as part of this we will need to cut back on staff numbers.”

Nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers held nationwide strikes in 2018 and 2019, with demands, including an increase in staffing levels, to alleviate the extreme pressure on hospitals. These struggles were sold out by the trade union bureaucracy, which echoed the Ardern government’s claims that there was no money to immediately address the crisis.

The 2018 nurses’ strike, for instance, ended with a deal valued at just \$500 million, including a meagre 3 percent pay increase and no significant staff increase.

The same government responded to the pandemic by handing out more than \$11 billion, so far, to businesses in the form of subsidies, not counting tax concessions and loans. The Reserve Bank has agreed to spend up to \$60 billion on quantitative easing: printing money to buy financial assets and prop up the markets and the wealth of the super-rich.

The government has begun an advertising campaign calling on the public to “unite for the recovery” from COVID-19, including by “buying Kiwi-made goods” to “help get our businesses and communities humming.” Ardern has described New Zealanders as a “team of five million.”

Contrary to this nationalist propaganda, the country is deeply divided and social inequality is soaring. The ruling class is using the pandemic and the economic crisis to restructure class relations, with major attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

Mass redundancies are continuing. In the past week, The Warehouse retail chain announced six store closures and up to 1,080 job cuts—after receiving \$67 million in wage subsidies from the government.

Air New Zealand, which is majority-owned by the government and has access to a \$900 million government loan, warned that it may slash a further 2,000 jobs, on top of 4,000 already confirmed.

The Association of Consulting Engineers estimates

that 2,000 highly skilled consultants (15 percent of the workforce) could lose their jobs, largely due to councils and government agencies cutting spending.

TVNZ, the state-owned broadcaster, has announced plans for up to 90 layoffs, following similar announcements by private media companies. Event Cinemas has so far cut 60 jobs nationwide. Vodafone estimates it will axe more than 100 positions.

More attacks are looming. The OECD estimates that New Zealand’s gross domestic product will shrink by 8.9 percent this year or 10 percent if there is a second wave of COVID-19 infections. Its economic outlook report, released this month, predicts “a surge in unemployment” when the government’s wage subsidy scheme expires in August.



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