

Quarantine bungalows in New Zealand threaten new COVID-19 outbreak

Tom Peters
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On June 9, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government lifted all social distancing restrictions and declared the country free from the coronavirus, to great media fanfare in New Zealand and internationally. One week later, director-general of health Ashley Bloomfield reported two new cases, the first detected since May 22.

Two sisters who returned from Britain on June 7 were allowed to drive more than 600 kilometres from Auckland to Wellington on June 13 following the death of a family member in the capital. The Labour Party-led government had assured the public that returned travellers were required to spend 14 days in hotels that are being used as quarantine facilities. However, the women were granted a "compassionate exemption" to leave early and were only tested for COVID-19 after they reached Wellington, on June 15.

Bloomfield initially told the media only "low-risk" individuals were granted such exemptions and said he was "not nervous" about the possibility the women had infected others, because they had remained in their vehicle. Later it was revealed that they actually stopped to seek directions from friends, placing them at risk.

A number of similar reports have emerged. *Newshub* reported that 10 travellers were allowed to leave quarantine in Christchurch to attend a burial with about 150 people on June 16. Health authorities did not confirm whether they had been tested for COVID-19.

On Sunday, Bloomfield revealed that approximately 2,400 returned travellers had been quarantined for 14 days but not tested before release. He downplayed the risk that the virus had escaped into the community, but added that these people were being followed up to check that they do not have the virus.

In fact, the failure to test all new arrivals carries tremendous dangers. COVID-19 spreads extremely

quickly and many carriers have no symptoms. With the pandemic raging throughout the world largely unchecked, the likelihood of travellers returning to New Zealand with the virus is high.

New Zealand has recorded 1,513 cases of COVID-19, including 22 deaths. The Ministry of Health says there are 10 active cases, all recent arrivals from overseas who are isolated in hotels.

As in nearly every country, however, the Ardern government has not carried out mass testing of the population. Tests have been restricted to people with symptoms and close contacts of positive cases. As of Monday, 344,519 people had been tested (under 7 percent of the population).

Several community testing sites in small towns have reportedly been closed in recent weeks. A plan to close Wellington's testing centres this week was dropped after the recent quarantine breaches.

Media commentators have attacked the government over the debacle. Radio NZ's Kathryn Ryan declared yesterday that "tens of billions of dollars" had been spent fighting the virus and "failure is not an option." She asked: "What the hell is going on when a protocol is instituted and it is not being carried out?"

Newshub's Duncan Garner told his viewers: "You have every right to stand up and hurl obscenities at those in charge, who look more than incompetent."

Such statements reflect fears in the ruling elite that a renewed outbreak of COVID-19 would further damage the economy and jeopardise plans to reopen the border with Australia and other countries.

On June 18, Bloomfield apologised for the failure to test the two sisters before they left isolation. The opposition National Party, meanwhile, is demanding that Health Minister David Clark be sacked.

Scrambling to contain the political damage, Ardern

last week placed the Defence Force in charge of the quarantine hotels, which currently have more than 4,200 travellers in isolation. The public health system, after decades of severe underfunding by Labour and National governments, was incapable of managing the facilities and had already been relying on the military for assistance for weeks.

Neale Jones, Ardern's former chief of staff, told Radio NZ yesterday that the government was in "very dangerous territory" because its "entire current popularity is built on its response to COVID."

Polls showed strong support for the lockdown imposed from late March to mid-May. However, as in other countries, the government sought to appease businesses by allowing workplaces and schools to reopen earlier than health experts had recommended.

Above all, the ruling elite fears the growth of anger in the working class. Businesses, assisted by the trade union bureaucracy, have seized on the pandemic to slash jobs and restructure their operations at the expense of workers. More than a third of households have suffered a decline in income since the pandemic.

One sign of the shift to the left, particularly among young people, is the mass protests against police killings in the US and the arming of police in NZ. This radicalisation will deepen and take on a more pronounced anti-capitalist character as the economic crisis worsens.

New Zealand's gross domestic product fell by 1.6 percent in the March quarter, the worst contraction in 29 years. ANZ Bank economists expect the economy to shrink by 19 percent in the second quarter, with unemployment rising to 10 percent by September.

More than 50,000 people have signed up to the Jobseeker allowance since March 20. Tourism-related businesses have collapsed and virtually every sector of the economy is in crisis.

Retail Association chief executive Greg Harford told Radio NZ yesterday about 6,700 retail businesses are "at serious risk" of failing. He said that job losses could be "between 17,000 and 65,000 over the next six to eight months."

Thousands of temporary migrant workers who have lost jobs are barred from accessing unemployment benefits and relying on emergency relief from the government. Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, from the anti-immigrant NZ First Party, has demanded

that jobless migrants leave the country "as soon as possible."

Meanwhile, there is unlimited cash for the financial markets, and big businesses have received billions in subsidies, bailouts and tax breaks. Defence Minister Ron Mark told *Stuff* on June 13 that the government remains committed to spending \$20 billion on military upgrades, including new air force planes, naval vessels and armoured vehicles.

The government, supported by every party in parliament, is strengthening the armed forces in order to integrate further New Zealand into US war plans, particularly against China. It is also preparing to suppress opposition at home to the worst levels of social inequality since the 1930s Great Depression.



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