

New outbreak of COVID-19 in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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Yesterday a “level three” lockdown was imposed in Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city, after four people in a family tested positive for COVID-19 on Tuesday. Thirteen other cases linked to the South Auckland family have since been found, including four children.

COVID-19 testing stations in Auckland were overwhelmed yesterday, with some people waiting up to 12 hours for a test and others reportedly being turned away.

About a quarter of Auckland’s workers are staying home and schools are closed, except for the children of essential workers. The restrictions were announced for three days, but are widely expected to be extended. They are not as stringent, however, as the “level four” nationwide lockdown imposed in March-April. Under level three, construction businesses, cafes and other shops can still operate, supposedly with social distancing protocols in place.

The rest of the country is on alert level two, with people told to practice physical distancing, and gatherings of more than 100 people banned. Schools and businesses remain open.

The new coronavirus cases are the first to be discovered in New Zealand in 102 days, apart from international travellers. More than 7,000 returned travellers are currently undergoing two weeks of quarantine in hotels controlled by the military. Of these, at least 23 have the virus.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-led government has been glorified by the world’s media for its response to the pandemic, including a relatively early and strict lockdown. The country has experienced just 22 deaths from the virus.

The rediscovery of COVID-19 in the community, however, underscores that the pandemic cannot be defeated at a national level, but requires a coordinated and well-resourced international response that is

incompatible with the capitalist nation-state system.

New Zealand joins a list of countries which have seen new outbreaks after apparently suppressing the virus, including Vietnam and parts of China. Australia, which had also been praised for its response, is experiencing a severe resurgence.

The outbreak in Auckland poses serious dangers to the entire working class. The source of the cases is unknown. Authorities have not identified any contact between the household and quarantine hotels or international travellers.

How far the virus has spread is not known. Dr Ashley Bloomfield, director-general of health, told Radio NZ today that it could have been “in the community for some weeks.”

Over the weekend, the family at the centre of the outbreak visited Rotorua and on Monday they went to Taupo, but the tourist towns have not been locked down. A positive case also visited an unidentified aged care facility in the Waikato region. The decision to limit the lockdown to level three, while mostly allowing business as usual in the rest of the country, is driven by demands from big business for the economy to remain open.

Restrictions in April and May were lifted earlier than health experts had recommended, and the government previously indicated that it would not impose another nationwide lockdown.

Bloomfield warned in recent weeks that the re-emergence of the virus in the community was a matter of “when, not if.” He urged people to keep records of their movements and use the government’s COVID Tracer smartphone app, which records visits to shops and other locations.

Epidemiologists have criticised the government’s failure to carry out widespread testing, which could have picked up the outbreak sooner. Testing is still limited to people with symptoms, despite the well-

known fact that the virus can be transmitted by asymptomatic people.

Daily rates of testing fell dramatically in recent months, as the government and media trumpeted NZ's "COVID-free" status. In early August around 2,000 people were being tested per day, much less than the health ministry's low target of 4,000. According to the ministry, 508,711 people have been tested in total, about 10 percent of the population, and there are about 270,000 more test kits in stock.

On August 5, professor Michael Baker told the *New Zealand Herald* there was too much complacency and "smugness." He warned that there were "multiple points" where the virus could enter the country, including quarantine facilities, airport staff and workers on ships.

A series of bungles at quarantine facilities prompted the resignation of David Clark as minister of health last month. In one case on July 9, a man escaped from a quarantine hotel and visited a supermarket in central Auckland. He later tested positive for COVID-19.

Baker noted: "If there was suddenly an outbreak in South Auckland tomorrow, for instance, it could take several generations before people were even aware of it. Small numbers of people can go on to infect large numbers of people."

University of Auckland scientist Shaun Hendy also warned: "With relatively low numbers of testing, we could potentially have a large number of secondary and tertiary cases before we actually realised what was going on."

South Auckland, where the new cases were detected, is a largely impoverished working class area, with many overcrowded and poorly-heated houses and widespread health problems. It was the epicentre for a measles outbreak last year, which spread from New Zealand to Samoa where it killed 83 people, most of them children.

Epidemiologist David Skegg told *Stuff* on August 5 that the catastrophic outbreak in Victoria, Australia, could "easily be replicated here, if we are not able to act quickly enough to eliminate the infection." He called for "a greater sense of urgency in getting prepared," including targeted community testing, sewage testing, greater capacity for contact tracing and preparations for mass masking.

A resurgence of COVID-19 could have major

political implications. With an election scheduled for September 19, Ardern has made the government's pandemic response central to Labour's campaign. The perception that the government had eliminated the virus fuelled support for the party, which is polling above 50 percent.

In reality, while failing to undertake adequate testing and other public health measures, the government's main response to the pandemic has been to give billions of dollars to businesses through so-called "wage subsidies," tax cuts and bailouts.

The global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic has led to tens of thousands of job losses in NZ. The tourism industry, which accounts for one in 10 jobs, has been devastated, and there have been major redundancies in retail and manufacturing. The new COVID-19 outbreak will compound the social crisis that is already pushing workers and young people to the left.

The opposition National Party, which is polling between 25 and 30 percent, is now calling for the election to be delayed. Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, who leads the deeply unpopular right-wing NZ First Party in the coalition government, made similar calls in April. The government says it will make a decision on the election date before Monday.



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