

New Zealand election date postponed as COVID-19 cases rise

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New Zealand's Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced on Monday that she had decided to shift the date of the forthcoming national elections from September 19 to October 17.

The near month-long postponement takes place amid a second outbreak of COVID-19 cases, centred in South Auckland. After 102 days with no evidence of community transmission, the country's biggest city is now under a "level three" lockdown, at least until August 26.

In just over a week, 80 cases of COVID-19 have been identified in the community, not including 21 infections among people who have arrived from overseas. Almost all positive cases are in hotels that have been turned into quarantine facilities run by the military. Six patients have been hospitalised. Two of the community cases have no known link to the South Auckland cluster, including one hotel maintenance worker.

Ardern and Health Minister Chris Hipkins admitted to a breakdown of COVID-19 testing for frontline workers at borders and quarantine facilities, blaming public officials for failing the government's "expectations." Ardern announced Wednesday that some 500 additional NZ Defence Force staff will guard quarantine hotels, bringing the total military involvement to over 1,000 personnel.

The country's second coronavirus outbreak continues to grow every day, and the source of the main cluster is unknown. It has spread to a number of workplaces, including a cold storage facility, a NZ Post centre, the Ports of Auckland, two tertiary institutions and several schools. Thousands of people have been tested as "close contacts" of infected persons.

The election delay highlights the increasing political instability triggered by the pandemic. It is only the fourth such postponement in New Zealand's history.

The previous occasions were during World Wars I and II and in response to the upsurge of working-class opposition to capitalism during the 1930s Great Depression.

Ardern said her decision was based on public health concerns and was "in the best interests of voters and our democracy." In fact, it was a political compromise in response to demands from the opposition National Party, which has been lagging in the polls, and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, which is part of the government. National claimed that the Auckland lockdown meant it could not properly campaign, and that Ardern gained an "unfair" advantage from her daily COVID-19 briefings.

Significantly, Ardern's announcement came the day after Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, leader of coalition partner NZ First, revealed he had written to Ardern stating his preference for a delay. He publicly released the letter, he said, to make sure the governor-general knew a majority of parliament, including NZ First and National, wanted a delay. It amounted to a threat to break up the coalition and cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election, if Ardern did not accede.

Ardern publicly rejected suggestions that she had been swayed by Peters' letter. Her decision, however, effectively throws NZ First a lifeline, giving the party more time to campaign. It is currently polling below the 5 percent threshold required to re-enter parliament.

NZ First is a right-wing nationalist party, notorious for its racist and anti-immigrant agitation against Chinese, Indian and Muslim people. It advocates a strong military and police force. Labour gave NZ First a major role in the coalition government, despite the party receiving only 7.2 percent of the votes in 2017. With Peters embedded as foreign minister, the Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition has further integrated New

Zealand into the US military preparations against China in the Asia-Pacific region, and implemented harsh anti-immigrant policies.

Peters decided to form a coalition with the Labour Party, despite the National Party gaining more votes in 2017, because Labour's anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese policies were more closely aligned with NZ First.

Ardern's change of date received widespread support from the corporate media. Right-wing columnist Matthew Hooton described it in the *New Zealand Herald* as a "masterful" move, while the Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce said it gave "some surety in uncertain times."

Ordinary people, however, were less enthusiastic. According to a *Herald* poll on August 17, before the announcement, 60 percent supported a postponement, mostly in Auckland. Elsewhere there was stronger support for the original date, with 53 percent in Wellington saying it should go ahead as planned, and 43 percent in Canterbury saying the same.

Behind the political turmoil there are rising social tensions. The pandemic has already led to tens of thousands of job losses. The tourism industry, which accounts for one in 10 jobs, has been devastated, and there have been major redundancies in retail and manufacturing. Thousands of people are struggling to sustain rent and mortgage payments.

Having been glorified by the world's media for its response to the pandemic, including a relatively early and strict lockdown in March-April, New Zealand is now one of many countries, including Australia, experiencing serious new outbreaks. This underscores the falsehood of the conception—promoted by the trade unions, pro-Labour Party pundits and pseudo-left groups—that the global pandemic could be defeated through national isolationism.

Finance Minister Grant Robinson was forced this week to announce a two-week extension to the government's "wage subsidy" scheme, covering approximately 470,000 jobs. The scheme, originally due to expire on September 1, is in fact a subsidy for employers who can show a revenue drop due to COVID-19 of 40 percent, and has already paid out more than \$NZ13 billion.

The Child Poverty Action Group, Salvation Army, Lifewise and Auckland Action Against Poverty have all

warned that welfare benefits are not sufficient to survive on. Treasury is forecasting unemployment to more than double to 10 percent this quarter.

The surge in cases is hitting the working class the hardest, particularly Pacific and Maori communities in impoverished and overcrowded areas of South Auckland. The *Guardian* reported on Wednesday that of the new cases linked to public transmission, Pacific Islanders make up 74 percent while Māori account for 16 percent. "It's nothing to do with the virus, it's the socioeconomic conditions," Dr Colin Tukuitonga of Auckland University said.

There are signs of unrest. Some 3,200 nurses and other health workers at medical centres across the country are due to walk off the job on September 3 as part of a long-running struggle for pay parity with their counterparts employed by District Health Boards.

While the Labour Party remains the business elite's preferred option to lead the next government, the deepening social crisis, the coronavirus outbreak and the election delay could hinder its re-election campaign. At Labour's launch on August 8, Ardern confidently declared that the campaign would be fought as a "COVID election," based on her government's purportedly successful record leading the country's so-called "team of five million" through the pandemic.

Whatever tactical adjustments are now made, Ardern has made it clear that there will be no repeat of Labour's 2017 election campaign, which falsely promised "transformative" action to reduce child poverty and solve the housing crisis. None of this has come to fruition, as Labour has run a right-wing government imposing austerity and anti-immigrant measures at home, along with pro-US militarism abroad.



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