

New Zealand government ends Auckland lockdown

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's Labour Party-led government reopened schools and workplaces in Auckland yesterday. The city was placed under a "level 3" lockdown on August 12 after a new outbreak of COVID-19, following 102 days in which no cases of coronavirus were detected. About a quarter of workers and 250,000 school students stayed home during the lockdown.

The alert level is being lowered from 3 to 2.5 in Auckland, with travel restrictions to and from the city ending. Social distancing requirements remain and gatherings are restricted to ten people. Nationally, the government has mandated the wearing of masks on public transport.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told a press conference on Sunday: "I cannot express how important [it] is" to restrict gathering sizes. "If we want to stop the spread, we need to stop socialising for some time," she stated. The rule, however, does not apply to schools or workplaces.

The lockdown is being ended despite new cases of COVID-19 being found every day. There are now 132 active cases of the virus: 99 from the Auckland cluster and the remainder among returned travellers. The country has experienced a total of 22 deaths and more than 1,400 cases since the pandemic began.

As was the case in April and May, when nationwide restrictions were progressively lifted, the decision to end Auckland's lockdown was taken against the advice of healthcare experts.

Ardern told the media the decision was "not at all" politically motivated. In reality, her government is following in the footsteps of its counterparts internationally, including in Australia, Europe and the US, which have carried out "back to work" and "back to school" campaigns despite opposition from medical

experts and the working class.

With an election scheduled for October 17—after being postponed by four weeks—the government is sending a clear message to the business elite: the Labour Party will place your profit interests ahead of protecting people's health and lives.

The Auckland outbreak, which has spread to many parts of the city and the town of Tokoroa, was the avoidable outcome of an appallingly low level of testing and the failure to regularly test workers at the border and quarantine hotels. Testing and contact tracing capacity has been boosted in recent weeks, but the government is still limiting tests to people with symptoms and contacts of positive cases.

Professor Shaun Hendy, a modelling expert and advisor to the government, told *Newshub* he would have preferred a longer level 3 lockdown in Auckland. He said the fact that new cases were emerging every day meant there was "far more risk" of a resurgence than when the nationwide lockdown was lifted in May. At that time several days had passed without new cases of COVID-19 being detected, except for returned travellers.

Auckland University microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles told Radio NZ she was "worried" that the virus could be spread around the country by people who do not know that they have it. She said she would have extended the lockdown, and noted that the government had faced "the business people saying 'we need you to open up' [and] the health people saying 'we need to stay closed.'"

Otago University epidemiologist professor Michael Baker said there was a "reasonable chance" of eliminating the Auckland cluster at level 2.5, "but it does depend on people following these rules." He called for the wearing of masks in all indoor

environments outside the home, not just public transport.

Ignoring such concerns, Education and Health Minister Chris Hipkins urged Auckland parents to send their children back to school. He told Radio NZ today: “There is no good reason not to be sending your kids back to school” and branded reports to the contrary as “misinformation.”

Thousands of children stayed home. Sutton Park school principal Fa’atili Iosua Esera told Radio NZ about 30 percent of students attended yesterday because parents were “fearful for their children.” James Cook High School in Manurewa told the *New Zealand Herald* just over half of its students turned up, while Mt Huhu Primary School and Mt Ngere Central School reported attendance of just one third.

The government’s decision is not based on healthcare advice. It wants children back in schools so that their parents can return to work and the extraction of profit can resume.

The teacher unions—the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) and the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA)—support the reopening of schools. Both unions opposed the initial lockdown in March, despite widespread calls for school closures from teachers and parents, only changing their position the day it was announced by Ardern.

On NZEI’s Facebook page Anne commented: “How is it safe for schools to reopen under Level 2 when outside the school gates group numbers are capped at 10? Endangering teachers’ lives.”

The PPTA published an enthusiastic Facebook update saying: “In the words of one of our Auckland field officers: ‘Just a massive big fist pump for Auckland teachers who are heading back.’” It directed teachers to the official Ministry of Education advice.

A letter to the PPTA from a teacher, forwarded to the WSWs, said they would not return to school because they were in close contact with vulnerable people: “I would like to continue to teach online and be paid. I am not satisfied that safety can be maintained in a school currently and there is evidence of continued transmission in several parts of Auckland.”

This teacher continued: “I am wondering where the PPTA is around this and why teachers are expected to put themselves at risk in areas of high population... I feel like everyone is in denial about the risks in schools

and the PPTA have had a role to play in not questioning the obvious contradictions in the school environment.”

New Zealand’s union bureaucracy is collaborating with businesses and the government to reopen the economy and to attack workers’ living standards. In tourism, retail, manufacturing and other industries, unions have enforced thousands of redundancies and wage cuts.

The government’s main response to the pandemic has been to give businesses tens of billions of dollars in subsidies, loans and tax concessions, and billions more to the banks in the form of quantitative easing.

Meanwhile, a social crisis is unfolding on a scale not seen in decades. Median incomes have fallen by 7.6 percent in the past year. The Ministry of Social Development now predicts over 16 percent of working-age people will be on welfare by January 2021—which would be the highest rate ever recorded.

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