

New Zealand: Auckland University backs away from resuming classes after mass student opposition

John Braddock
18 September 2020

Auckland University, New Zealand's largest, has reversed its plan to get students on campus next Monday for the final two weeks of Semester 2. The U-turn follows mass opposition by students to a decision to operate classes of up to 300 people while the city remains under COVID-19 restrictions.

In an email to staff on Thursday, Vice-Chancellor Dawn Freshwater said learning will now remain online until October 2, "regardless of alert levels." She declared the decision was taken after Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield told reporters that lectures and classes involving more than 10 students were not permitted under current settings. Freshwater claimed Bloomfield's comments had "created a degree of confusion" among staff and students, adding to "anxiety levels."

In fact, students had flooded the vice chancellor with messages and some 10,000 signed petitions calling on the university to maintain online learning until it can safely uphold social distancing requirements. The university had blandly responded that safety remained its priority and mask-wearing was "strongly encouraged" where physical distancing is not possible.

One Auckland University student tested positive for COVID-19 in August. Another student anonymously told the *New Zealand Herald* that the university was "actively ignoring concerns" and students were being forced back to campus with "no support." They described the university's response as "lacklustre at best, negligent at worst."

Others echoed the concerns, saying that while there is a limit of 10 on social gatherings and no more than 50 at a funeral, it was okay to "put 300 in a lecture hall with no mandatory masks." More than 100 contacted

the media, saying they were "appalled," "stressed out," and thought the decision was "insane," "ridiculous" and "unsafe."

Students had also expressed outrage about a fee of \$30–\$50 to apply for compassionate consideration for those unable to attend exams due to sickness. A student told *Newshub* that some were likely to turn up sick as they would not be able to afford the fees or feared failing: "It's really, really concerning. We're being forced to choose between an education, and our wellbeing."

The student protests are part of an international wave of opposition to the reopening of universities, which is subordinating the safety of students and staff to the demands of big business.

In the US, graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan struck for two weeks in defiance of threats by administrators. They were demanding remote-only learning and other protections. The reopening of New York University is encountering growing opposition among faculty and students.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern last Monday extended New Zealand's current level of COVID-19 restrictions for another week. Level 2.5 restrictions on Auckland—which include a 10-person limit on social gatherings—are in place until September 21, while the rest of the country has Level 2 restrictions.

Auckland's Level 3 lockdown was originally imposed after a resurgence of community transmission of the virus in August. The source of the outbreak remains unknown. As of Thursday there were 53 active cases in the community, plus 33 among people who have returned from overseas. The Auckland clusters were still seeing daily increases until Tuesday, and

resulted in two recent deaths. Some 89 users of an Auckland gym visited by someone infected with COVID-19 are currently being sought for testing.

With an election scheduled for October 17—after being postponed by four weeks—the Labour Party-led government is following 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.

Auckland University modelling expert Shaun Hendy has warned of COVID-19 spreading to other regions from Auckland. If the decision is made to drop to alert level 1, removing social distancing requirements, masks should continue to be mandatory and testing numbers must stay consistently high, he said.

Testing plummeted after New Zealand was declared free from community transmission and a lockdown was lifted in May—only for a new outbreak to be discovered in August.

The attempted move to open Auckland University followed the forced return of primary and secondary schools. Education and Health Minister Chris Hipkins urged Auckland parents to send their children back to school, telling Radio NZ: “There is no good reason not to be sending your kids back to school.” He branded reports to the contrary as “misinformation.”

Many parents resisted the minister’s call, which was fully endorsed by the teacher unions, and thousands of children were kept at home. Schools in contact with the Auckland cluster reported positive cases among their students and briefly closed for cleaning. These included Mt Albert Grammar School, Mt Albert Primary, Glamorgan Primary School, Southern Cross Campus, Sunnyvale School, St Dominic’s College and Chapel Downs School.

New Zealand has so far recorded 1,451 COVID-19 cases and 25 deaths. Three people are in hospital, with two of them in intensive care. There are 96 people with the coronavirus at present, with 39 of them imported cases, all quarantined in government-managed isolation facilities.

Ardern claimed on Monday that New Zealand had “followed a plan that has worked,” referring to her government’s early lockdown of the country in March. “This has both saved lives, but also meant our economy has been able to be more open in a more sustained way

than nearly any other country in the world,” she declared. In fact, as in April and May, when nationwide restrictions were lifted, the decision to lower Auckland’s alert level from 3 to 2.5 at the beginning of September was taken against the advice of healthcare experts.

Facing the collapse of their foreign student businesses, universities have been at the forefront of demands by the ruling elite to re-open the borders while launching vicious attacks on jobs and staff conditions, along with the rights of students.

International education is one of New Zealand’s most important industries, attracting more than 100,000 students a year. It is worth more than \$NZ5 billion (\$US3 billion) to the economy. The universities unsuccessfully pitched a quarantine system to the government in March when travel restrictions were preventing thousands of students from travelling to New Zealand.

At Wellington’s Victoria University the usual number of 3,300 fee-paying students has dropped to 2,200, with another reduction of 1,000 expected if the borders remain closed. Despite overwhelming staff opposition to restructuring proposals, the university is warning that up to 300 job cuts remain on the agenda. A loss of \$33 million is forecast for 2021, on top of the \$19 million deficit for 2020. Schools are also preparing to lay off extra teachers they have been paying with fees from foreign students.

Meanwhile, Labour announced this week that it will break a major promise it had made at the 2017 election to extend its “fees free” policy beyond the first year, to two years of academic study in 2021 and three by 2024. This has now been put on ice indefinitely, along with another pledge to reinstate a postgraduate student allowance. Instead, Hipkins declared: “We will be targeting our additional tertiary education spending in areas that are critical for the country’s economic recovery in the post-COVID environment.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact