

New Zealand government negligence led to Auckland's COVID-19 cluster

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's largest city has been in a partial one-week lockdown since Sunday, February 28, following the discovery of new COVID-19 cases linked to Papatoetoe High School in working class South Auckland. The "level 3" lockdown includes the closure of many workplaces and most schools, except for children who cannot be supervised at home. Outside Auckland, the country has "level 2" restrictions in place, which mandate social distancing and contact tracing, and masks on public transport.

By Monday, tens of thousands of tests had identified 15 cases with links to the cluster, the origin of which has still not been found. The first three cases were identified on February 14, including one high school student and their mother, who was employed at LSG SkyChefs at Auckland Airport. There were suspicions that the virus was brought from overseas through the airport, but this is unconfirmed. All the cases are thought to be the of the more infectious UK variant of COVID-19.

Much of the growth of the cluster was avoidable. On February 17, when three more confirmed cases had been identified, the Labour Party-Greens government decided to end a lockdown of the city after just three days. This was strongly criticised by epidemiologists and other medical experts. Auckland University professor Des Gorman said the lockdown should have been extended for two more weeks. He and epidemiologist Rod Jackson both said in media interviews that business interests were being prioritised over public health.

Papatoetoe High School remained closed for five more days, with public health authorities encouraging staff, students and their families to get tested and to "work from home if they can." The school reopened on February 22.

To divert attention from the government's negligence, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, echoed by Auckland mayor Phil Goff and much of the media, has sought to blame the outbreak on individuals who "broke the rules."

Ardern told the media on February 26 that she was "frustrated" with a woman known as Case L, who had just tested positive for COVID-19 after going to work at a KFC outlet in Botany Downs on February 22. The fast food worker's sister, a Papatoetoe High student, tested positive on February 23.

Ardern hypocritically said she did not want "a massive pile on that creates an environment where people are afraid to get tested" if they have not followed the public health advice. On March 1, however, she menacingly told TVNZ, "it is not OK for people to break the rules and those who have are feeling the full consequences of the entire weight of the country right now." She added that it was "the job of police" to decide whether to prosecute such cases.

In response, Case L told *Newshub* she had not, in fact, been told to self-isolate. She said her family was "getting all this backlash for something that we haven't actually done... We're being called stupid, saying that our family needs to be prosecuted, be put in jail." Her sister had received a text message on February 14 instructing her to self-isolate but saying that her family did not need to do the same. Case L saw the message, and so went to work.

In short, the government decided to lift the initial lockdown on February 17 and encourage as many people back to work as possible, before it was safe to do so. Those linked to the Papatoetoe cluster were told to continue working from home "if they can," which is obviously not possible for fast food workers. Workers who simply followed these instructions are now being

scapegoated for the further spread of coronavirus.

For the past year, the Ardern government has been glorified by the media as an international model for its handling of the pandemic. It implemented a relatively strict lockdown in March–April 2020, in response to mass pressure from healthcare workers, teachers and others. So far, the country has only recorded 26 deaths from the coronavirus.

Since April last year, however, the government has repeatedly eased restrictions earlier than experts have advised. A collapse in COVID-19 testing following the first lockdown led to another outbreak last August, including a number of deaths, but only Auckland was locked down. Ardern has assured big business that she intends to avoid any further nationwide shutdowns.

Experts and healthcare workers have raised concerns about conditions in managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities—hotels that have been repurposed to accommodate people returning from overseas for a two-week period of isolation. Many of these centres are understaffed, and lack the ability to enforce proper social distancing and ventilation. Over the past year, numerous COVID-19 cases have leaked from the hotels into the community. There are currently 53 people in MIQ who have tested positive.

Another factor in the latest outbreak is the intense economic pressure facing workers and small businesses in South Auckland, one of the poorest areas of the country. Workers with COVID-19 symptoms may well face pressure from employers to go to work regardless.

Like governments in Australia, the US and Europe, the Ardern government’s main response to the pandemic was to make tens of billions of dollars available to businesses, in the form of subsidies, loans and bailouts. The Reserve Bank’s quantitative easing measures are pumping billions more into the coffers of the banks.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of workers have been sacked, and out-of-control speculation in the property market has pushed up rents and house prices, leading to increased homelessness and insecurity. At least one in five children are living in poverty after housing costs are accounted for.

Fuatino Laban, who works at a South Auckland food bank, told TVNZ on February 24 that the government’s latest child poverty figures, which show a marginal improvement, were “skewed” because the survey

ended before the pandemic hit New Zealand. “During the winter it was so hard, getting families coming through asking for blankets, heaters, using clothing to sleep underneath just to keep themselves warm,” she said.

Chris Farrelly, from Auckland City Mission, told Radio NZ on March 2 that “in the last 12 months food insecurity in New Zealand has doubled” and roughly a million people, one in five, “cannot afford, week-on-week, to put nutritious, good, appropriate food on their table for themselves and their families.”

This month the government announced it will set up six “food hubs” in Auckland because of the soaring demand facing charities. The government has refused to significantly lift welfare benefits and wages or take other measures such as rent controls to address the crisis.



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