

New Zealand locked down after Delta cases identified

Tom Peters
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On Tuesday evening, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, and the Coromandel region, will be placed in lockdown for seven days, and the rest of the country for three days, after a 58-year-old Auckland man tested positive for the highly-infectious Delta variant of COVID-19. Six more people, all linked to the man, have since tested positive. The lockdowns could be extended depending on the scale of the outbreak.

The positive cases include a nurse at Auckland Hospital, who is fully vaccinated, and a teacher from Avondale College. Most of the infections are among people in their 20s, who are not yet eligible for vaccinations. The original source of the cluster has not been identified, but genomic testing shows it is linked to the outbreak in the Australian state of New South Wales.

More cases are likely to be found. The 58-year-old man was reportedly infectious since August 12. Health authorities are identifying locations of interest visited by the cases in Auckland and the Coromandel. The list so far includes dozens of shops, bars, cafes and nightclubs, a church and the SkyCity casino.

Schools and universities, many manufacturing businesses, cafes and restaurants have been closed, along with almost all retail outlets except supermarkets and petrol stations. Masks are mandatory on public transport and in shops.

This is the second time the entire country has been placed in a lockdown at level 4, the strictest level. The government was forced to impose a lockdown in late March 2020. Tens of thousands of workers, led by healthcare staff and teachers, had demanded a lockdown in 2020, independently of the teachers' and nurses' unions which opposed the measure until the day Ardern announced it.

New Zealand has so far not experienced the same level of deaths as other countries. It has recorded 26 fatalities

and just under 3,000 cases of the coronavirus since the pandemic began. The population is extremely vulnerable, however, as only around 17 percent are fully vaccinated. Small outbreaks triggered lockdowns in Auckland in August 2020 and February 2021.

In announcing the new lockdown, Ardern alluded to the disaster that is unfolding in Australia. "We've seen the dire consequences of taking too long to act... We've seen what happened in Sydney, we don't want that experience here," she said.

For weeks, the New South Wales state government refused to impose a statewide lockdown in response to the recent Sydney outbreak, allowing the virus to spread completely out-of-control. So far, 60 people have died in the outbreak. NSW premier Gladys Berejiklian has declared that the government will no longer aim to completely eliminate the virus before reopening the economy—a position that guarantees continued deaths and hospitalisations.

Even under New Zealand's level 4 lockdown, significant sections of workers remain at risk. Meat processing workers have not been given priority for vaccination, despite being classified as essential workers. They will continue to work in an environment that has been proven internationally to be a major source of COVID-19 infections.

During the first 2020 lockdown, the Meat Workers Union refused to take strike action to protect workers and ignored a petition by workers demanding the shutdown of the industry.

Internationally, governments have responded to the pandemic by placing the interests of big business ahead of the health and lives of the working class. They have been assisted by the trade unions, which act as adjuncts to the corporations and the state.

The Ardern government has been glorified in the international media for its approach to the virus, but it

shares the same basic pro-business priorities. The initial restrictions were lifted earlier than the government's own medical advisors had recommended, with Ardern declaring that public health considerations had to be "traded against the huge economic impact" of the lockdown. This decision, combined with a sharp drop in community testing, produced another outbreak in Auckland in August 2020.

Tens of billions of dollars have been given to businesses, in the form of bailouts, tax breaks and subsidies, and the Reserve Bank has printed billions more for quantitative easing to prop up the banks.

Meanwhile, the government is imposing austerity across essential services. The healthcare system is dangerously under-staffed and underfunded; hospitals throughout the country are already overwhelmed with patients affected by seasonal diseases and respiratory illnesses exacerbated by poor housing conditions.

College of General Practitioners medical director Dr Bryan Betty told Radio NZ on August 11: "We couldn't afford a situation in New Zealand to have [Delta] out of control in the community because it would risk collapsing or compromising our health system."

Alarmingly, College of Intensive Care Medicine chair Dr Andrew Stapleton said New Zealand's intensive care capacity per capita was similar to India's—where hospitals have been completely unable to cope and millions of people have died of COVID-19. On a normal day only about 25 of the country's 220 ICU beds are free. He called for greater staffing, and a doubling of capacity.

More than 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers and 1,500 midwives were due to strike this Thursday, for the second time this year, over low pay and the staffing crisis. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the midwives' union MERAS promptly seized on the lockdown announcement to cancel the strike. Many health workers commented angrily on Facebook, with some saying the stoppage ought to have been postponed instead of cancelled outright.

New Zealand has experienced a number of near misses that could have resulted in a major outbreak.

Radio NZ reported that as of August 11, 32 percent of port workers had not received even one dose of the vaccine, and just 58 percent were fully vaccinated—despite border workers supposedly being prioritised. The Port of Tauranga had a COVID-19 scare earlier this month after 11 crew members on the visiting container ship Rio de Plata tested positive. About 94 port workers who had been in contact with the ship had to be tested; only nine had

been vaccinated.

Experts have also raised concerns about breaches at the country's managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities. These are repurposed hotels, where people returning from overseas are required to spend two weeks. A recent investigation found that Delta transmission had occurred inside the Jet Park Hotel isolation facility in Auckland, when hotel room doors were opened simultaneously for just a few seconds.

The government only belatedly ended quarantine-free travel with Australia in June, after a man who visited Wellington from Sydney later tested positive. New Zealand businesses have continually agitated for the relaxation of border quarantine rules.

Despite the clear risks posed by Delta, on August 12 Ardern announced that the government intends to allow some returning travellers to self-isolate at home rather than in MIQ, if they are fully vaccinated. A trial of the scheme will begin in October.

Next year, the government plans to remove restrictions on travel from "low-risk" and "medium-risk" countries. Ardern did not say which countries she considered "low-risk," claiming it could change. The announcement was praised by tourism and business lobby groups.

The reality is that the coronavirus pandemic is surging throughout the world and killing more people than ever before. The latest outbreak in New Zealand demonstrates, yet again, that no single country can be considered safe. The pandemic requires an internationally coordinated and properly resourced healthcare response.

Such a science-based public health response, however, is incompatible with capitalism, in which policies are dictated by the profit interests of the super-rich. Governments are recklessly ploughing ahead with reopening schools and businesses, placing millions more lives in mortal danger.



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