

Lockdown continues amid New Zealand's Delta outbreak

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Yesterday Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that New Zealand's strict "level 4" lockdown will continue nationwide until Wednesday, September 1. After that, the biggest city, Auckland and the Northland region will "likely" remain in level 4 for another two weeks, while restrictions in the rest of the country will be reduced to level 3.

The Labour Party-led government says it is seeking to eliminate community transmission of the highly-infectious Delta variant of COVID-19. On Friday there were 347 active cases, the vast majority in Auckland, except for 14 in Wellington. In addition, there are 37 positive cases among travellers recently returned from overseas. The outbreak has more than doubled in size in just a few days, from 148 known cases on Tuesday. Seventeen people are in hospital with the virus, one in intensive care.

When the country went into lockdown on August 18 only one community case had been identified. The outbreak is thought to have originated with a person who returned from Australia on August 7.

Under level 4, schools and almost all businesses are closed, including cafes, restaurants and other retail outlets except supermarkets, pharmacies and corner stores. At level 3, many restrictions will remain in force: schools and universities will be mostly shut, but exemptions will be made for children whose parents are unable to work from home. Cafes and restaurants will be reopened only for take-aways.

In an article for the *Conversation* on Thursday, scientists Rachelle Binny, Siouxsie Wiles, Shaun Hendy and Michael Plank estimated that "upwards of 200 people" had been infected before the lockdown in "several superspreading" events, including a church service on August 14. They said "it's likely that at least Auckland will need several more weeks at alert level 4

to stamp out community transmission." Hendy has estimated the outbreak could be as large as 1,000 cases.

The four scientists said the "elimination strategy," squashing outbreaks by means of lockdowns, was the best option to deal with the virus, "simply because the alternatives are grim." The US, UK, Brazil, India and many other countries are seeing a major resurgence of cases and deaths due to governments reopening schools and workplaces and asserting that the population must "live with" the virus so that businesses can avoid disruptions. These homicidal policies are being enforced by the corporatised trade unions.

Despite New Zealand's relatively stringent measures, some workers remain at risk. Although the government says most of the new Delta cases since the lockdown have been due to transmission within households, some frontline workers have been infected, including nurses, at least one supermarket employee and food production workers. *Stuff* reported that a worker at a Tegel chicken factory in West Auckland has tested positive. As a precaution, 50 workers have been sent home and will be tested. Meat-processing factories are still operating, despite the industry being a major source of infections internationally.

New Zealand's vaccination program is only now starting to ramp up, and just 25 percent of the population is fully inoculated, making the country highly vulnerable. Moreover, vaccines, while essential, are no panacea. Epidemiologist Michael Baker warned during the *World Socialist Web Site*'s recent panel discussion on how to eradicate COVID-19: "Even if we had global vaccine access and high coverage, we would still have circulating virus. So, we need to combine vaccine with public health measures."

Since the beginning of the pandemic last year, the New Zealand government's main priority, like

governments throughout the world, has been to protect corporate profits at the expense of the working class. Businesses that expect to experience a decline in revenue of 40 percent due to the level four lockdown can apply for government subsidies of \$600 a week per full time employee.

The *Spinoff* economics commentator Bernard Hickey wrote that by September last year \$13.8 billion in wage subsidies had been distributed to 900,000 businesses. While this included 240,000 sole traders and many small businesses, several large corporations received tens of millions from the scheme. Fletcher Building, which sacked 1,000 staff last year, received \$67.7 million in public money. The construction giant posted a \$305 million profit for the year ended June 2021.

The corporate handouts and the Reserve Bank's quantitative easing program, which printed \$53 billion to buy bonds from the commercial banks, helped to inflate asset values by \$400 billion. House prices increased by nearly 30 percent in a single year. The government's policies, Hickey said, "dramatically widened inequality and... sent tens of thousands more children into poverty and homelessness."

The Labour government now claims it cannot afford to fix a crisis of understaffing, under-capacity and low pay in the country's public hospitals, which are completely unprepared for an uncontrolled outbreak of COVID-19. Shortly before the latest outbreak, tens of thousands of nurses, and thousands of midwives held nationwide strikes to oppose the austerity measures.

The government's elimination strategy for COVID-19 has overwhelming support. According to a poll of 629 people published by the *Spinoff* this week, 69 percent agreed with the strategy, only 10 percent opposed it and 21 percent were unsure.

Business representatives, however, have criticised the strategy. Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce chief executive Leann Watson told the *New Zealand Herald* the extension of "level 4" until Wednesday for the South Island was "disappointing" and said "ongoing lockdowns cannot be part of our long-term future."

Right-wing columnist Matthew Hooton lashed out at what he called a "handful" of "loons [who] argue that New Zealand should maintain the current elimination strategy whatever happens." He hoped that the government would move away from this policy "in the

new year once everyone has had a chance to be vaccinated."

Speaking to Nine News on Tuesday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison denounced New Zealand's elimination strategy as "absurd." He advocated reopening once vaccination rates have reached 70 to 80 percent and then treating coronavirus like the flu. The policy of "living with the virus" has already produced a worsening disaster in the state of New South Wales, where around 900 cases are being detected every day.

Prime Minister Ardern's response to Morrison's provocative comment was muted. She told Coast FM she was "not fussed" about it and that New Zealand did not intend to "lock down forever." Finance Minister Grant Robertson diplomatically told Newstalk ZB, "All of the experts continue to tell us the best strategy that we can take at the moment is elimination."

On Friday, Ardern stated that "our number one strategy right now is elimination and vaccination," but again left the door open for a change of direction, stating that over the coming months the government would "consider" its strategy for 2022. The government has already indicated that it wants to loosen border quarantine requirements for some people entering the country from next year, to accommodate the demands of big business.



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