

New Zealand: COVID-19 lockdown lifted outside Auckland

Tom Peters
9 September 2021

New Zealand's largest city, Auckland, remains in a strict "level 4" lockdown, with schools and the vast majority of businesses closed, to suppress an outbreak of the Delta variant of COVID-19. The rest of the country, however, dropped to "level 2" restrictions yesterday, meaning schools, public buildings and most businesses have reopened. The reopening of schools, in particular, risks spreading the virus if it is present in the community.

The entire country went into a lockdown on August 18 after a man tested positive for the highly infectious coronavirus. As of today, testing had detected a total of 868 cases associated with the outbreak. Of these, 264 people have recovered. Almost all the cases are in Auckland, with 9 active cases in Wellington, the capital.

One person has died in the outbreak, a Maori woman in her 90s, and 31 people remain in hospital, five in intensive care.

Daily case numbers, which peaked at 85 on August 29, are now trending downwards as a result of the lockdown. There were 13 new cases reported today, 15 yesterday and 21 the day before.

New Zealand's Labour Party-led government is still officially committed to a strategy of eliminating the Delta variant. That this can be done was demonstrated last month when China stamped out an outbreak using public health measures including mass testing and restrictions on movement and business activity.

Auckland University professor Shaun Hendy, who has modelled the spread of the virus, told a parliamentary committee yesterday that the estimated effective reproduction, or R, number for the outbreak had fallen to about 0.4. A number below 1 indicates that the average infected person is not passing on the virus to someone else. Hendy said elimination could be

achieved within weeks, provided the "level 4" lockdown in Auckland is maintained.

The removal of most restrictions outside Auckland, however, has significantly increased the risks. Thousands of workers, mostly truck drivers, are permitted to travel across the Auckland boundary. In Australia, truck drivers have spread the virus between different states.

The government only announced on Monday that these workers need to be tested for the virus. After a backlash from the freight industry, the government extended the deadline for workers to get tested to Thursday next week.

The reopening of schools and childcare centres outside Auckland, with virtually no restrictions, poses a major danger. With children not eligible for vaccination, schools have been one of the major centres for the spread of the virus internationally. In New Zealand, 121 children have tested positive for the Delta variant in the last three weeks.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told Radio NZ he was "most concerned" about the situation in schools. Unlike businesses and public transport, there is no requirement for face coverings in schools and no limits on indoor gathering sizes. Baker said "children are missing out on one of these essential protections [masks] if we do get an outbreak. And of course they are great at transmitting the virus to their families."

The unions have not criticised the reopening policy. The Post-Primary Teachers' Association and NZEI Te Riu Roa (the primary union) are simply echoing the government's statements that masks are "recommended" but not required. Anecdotal reports suggest that many teachers and children are not wearing masks.

The fact that less than a third of people aged over 12

are fully vaccinated increases the dangers. This includes workers in highly-exposed jobs who continue to work during the lockdown, such as public transport, meat processing and supermarket workers. Dozens of supermarkets have been listed by the Ministry of Health as potential “exposure sites” visited by someone with the virus.

Severely overcrowded and understaffed hospitals also pose a risk. On Saturday, a patient was admitted to a general ward at Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland. He was only tested and found to be positive for COVID-19 after spending the night in a hospital room with three other patients, who reported that he had symptoms of the virus.

Even after the patient had been swabbed, he was not immediately taken out of the shared room “because there were no isolation spaces on the ward,” according to the Ministry of Health. Twenty-nine hospital staff were temporarily stood down while they and the patients were tested.

Authorities yesterday said they did not know how the man, and eight of his family members, had caught the virus. There are a total of 30 unlinked or “mystery” cases, about 3 percent of known infections. Epidemiologists have warned that there should be zero unlinked cases before any easing of restrictions in Auckland.

The outbreak has placed immense pressure on working people. The government is providing hundreds of millions of dollars in so-called wage subsidies, which are given to businesses whose revenue has been impacted by the lockdown. Employers remain free to cut wages and sack workers. Many casual workers, such as relief teachers, have gone entirely without pay.

In an attempt to repair its image amid soaring grocery prices, supermarket chain Foodstuffs, whose workers receive close to the minimum wage, announced a temporary 10 percent pay bonus during the lockdown. The company, which is part of a duopoly in New Zealand, made a profit of \$205 million in the year to March.

Meanwhile, Ministry of Social Development figures show the number of people receiving a benefit increased by 4,578 in the first week of the level 4 lockdown, the biggest weekly rise since the March–April lockdown in 2020. There are 358,000 people relying on welfare—about 8.7 percent of the

working-age population.

Stuff reported on Tuesday that food insecurity has worsened, with the ministry receiving over 40,400 emergency food grant requests in the week ending August 27, more than double what it received at the same time last year.

The billions of dollars being spent by the government will be recouped from the working class through intensified austerity measures. A pay freeze has already been imposed across the public sector, including teachers and healthcare workers. This month, in the middle of the outbreak, emergency benefits for migrant workers were axed.

Even if the current NZ outbreak is suppressed, every country remains at risk while governments throughout the world lift restrictions and declare that the population must “live with the virus.” Millions have died as a result of such policies, which are aimed at keeping businesses open and profitable.

The Ardern government has come under pressure to move away from its elimination strategy from sections of business and the political establishment. Opposition National Party leader Judith Collins recently urged the government to end nationwide lockdowns as a policy when 70 to 75 percent of the eligible population are vaccinated. A similar policy has been adopted in Australia, where federal and state governments are preparing to ease restrictions in the middle of a catastrophic outbreak, brought about by the refusal to impose a strict lockdown.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact