

# New Zealand government eases COVID-19 lockdown in Auckland

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Yesterday the lockdown in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, was eased from "alert level 4" to "level 3," despite new cases of the highly infectious Delta variant of COVID-19 being reported every day.

The decision is a gamble with the health and lives of working people. Like governments internationally, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-led government is placing the demands of big business ahead of a science-based public health response.

The entire country went into a strict "level 4" lockdown on August 18, with the government saying its aim was to eliminate a Delta outbreak. Since then, 1,123 cases have been identified (861 of these have recovered), dozens of people have been hospitalised and one has died. Today another 15 new cases were reported, following 23 yesterday.

The lockdown was lifted for the rest of the country on September 8, with "alert level 2" restrictions still in place, such as mandatory masking in businesses and public transport. The lack of restrictions in schools, in particular, raises the risk of the virus spreading if it gets out of Auckland.

While "level 3" is still classified as a lockdown, with the government advising people to "work from home if they can," between 200,000 and 300,000 people are estimated to have returned to workplaces. A survey by the Auckland Business Chamber found that 80 percent of businesses could operate in some form. The Chamber's chief executive Michael Barnett told the *New Zealand Herald*: "Now we want to see a flexible level 3 to enable as many businesses to ramp up productivity and operations as quickly as possible."

Cafes, restaurants and fast food stores, and other retailers, can open for contactless services. Construction sites are also operating. Schools and early childhood education centres can reopen with small

class sizes.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told the *Guardian* moving to level 3 in Auckland was "a gamble" that "increases the risk that we won't contain the outbreak." He warned that "undetected chains of transmission could be simmering on," and while it was still possible to eliminate the virus, this would depend on "luck."

Speaking to Radio NZ on Wednesday, microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles urged the country to "stick with elimination." She pointed out that in the US, where shutdowns have never been properly implemented, an estimated 9 million years of life have been lost due to COVID-19. She said "the reason it's so high is because... about half of those years lost are from deaths in 25- to 64-year-olds, people who would have a considerable life still ahead of them."

The National Maori Pandemic Group, made up of public health experts and doctors, had urged the government to maintain level 4 in Auckland and called for the lockdown to be extended to the Waikato region, where three cases were detected over the weekend. The source was a remand prisoner who had been released from Auckland on bail to live in the Waikato. The cases highlight the dangerously porous boundary between Auckland and the rest of the country, which is crossed by thousands of people, mainly transport workers, every day.

Professor Sue Crengle, co-leader of the Group, told Radio NZ she feared that the disaster in New South Wales, Australia, could be repeated in New Zealand. Case numbers have exploded in the state due to lax restrictions. Like Australia's indigenous population, Maori and Pacific Islanders are at greater risk from COVID-19 due to poor health and much higher levels of poverty. The Auckland outbreak has predominantly

affected Pacific people in working class areas of the city.

The situation is made more dangerous by the low level of vaccination. Just over one third of NZ's population has received both doses of the Pfizer vaccine. The country's District Health Boards revealed yesterday that only 75 percent of healthcare workers are fully vaccinated. In Auckland the figure is 89 percent.

Reopening schools and early childhood centres, so that parents can return to work, poses another major risk. More than a third of Auckland's cases have been in people aged 0-19. An early childhood teacher in the city told the *World Socialist Web Site* she was concerned that teachers will be "risking our lives" if forced to work. "We are vulnerable to the virus like everyone else. It's also putting children at risk, who are vulnerable as well" and can spread the virus in the community.

She added that early childhood teachers were not even encouraged to wear masks, and it was impossible to enforce social distancing when working with young children. "We have to be cautious, especially when this virus has killed so many people around the world. The Delta variant spreads super-fast and it may still be out there somewhere, even though cases have gone down. We don't know yet," she said.

Such concerns have been brushed aside, not only by the government but also the primary and secondary teacher unions. These pro-business organisations are fully supporting the reopening policy, just like the unions in the US and other countries, where schools have played a central role in spreading the Delta variant.

Ardern claims that the government still aims to eliminate COVID-19 from the community—a strategy overwhelmingly supported by the population. Due to relatively stringent lockdowns, New Zealand has only recorded 27 deaths from the pandemic.

There is growing pressure from sections of the corporate media and political establishment to abandon the strategy and allow the virus to spread. *Stuff* columnist Luke Malpass declared on September 21 that if the Auckland lockdown is not lifted in two weeks, "elimination as a worthwhile public policy goal will have failed." He demanded a shift to "learning to live with Covid."

Opposition National Party leader Judith Collins told

the media that the drop to "level 3" in Auckland showed the Labour government had already "given up on the elimination strategy." She said the government should have vaccinated more people and prepared for a "surge" of hospitalisations.

The government is, in fact, preparing to move away from lockdowns. Health Minister Andrew Little told *Newshub* on September 18 that reimposing "level 4" would be "unlikely" once 90 percent of the eligible population is vaccinated. This figure does not include hundreds of thousands of children aged under 12, and vaccination alone is not enough to prevent outbreaks.

The government is clearly preparing for much larger outbreaks, which would overwhelm the severely underfunded and understaffed health system. Ominously, Little said: "I'm attracted to the Australian model" of admitting fewer COVID-19 patients to hospital and having "as many people as possible recovering at home, in the community," with "monitoring" from the hospital. In Australia, dozens of people are dying every week, some in their own homes, unable to access hospitals, which are in a state of crisis.



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