New Zealand teacher and advocate opposes reopening of early childcare during COVID-19 outbreak

Tom Peters
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On September 22, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government eased the COVID-19 lockdown in Auckland from "level 4," the strictest level, to "level 3." More than 200,000 people are estimated to have returned to workplaces, with restrictions such as masking and social distancing. Schools and early childhood centres (ECEs) have partially reopened for small numbers of children.

The decision to ease restrictions in New Zealand's largest city, before the outbreak of the highly-infectious Delta variant of COVID-19 has been stamped out, has been criticised as a gamble by public health experts. Since a nationwide lockdown was imposed on August 18, more than 1,100 cases have been identified, and in the past week, daily case numbers in Auckland have ranged between 9 and 24. The lockdown was lifted outside of Auckland on September 8.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern still says the government is pursuing a strategy to eliminate COVID-19 from the community. Like governments internationally, however, it has repeatedly shown that it is willing to risk public health, in order to appease big business' demands for a return to work.

In addition to the concerns expressed by epidemiologists and other experts, such as Dr Mike Bedford, a growing number of teachers are speaking out against the lowering of alert levels. In the United States and other countries, the reopening of schools and preschools/kindergartens, while COVID-19 is present in the community, has led to an explosion of cases, hospitalisations and deaths.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Susan Bates, an early childhood teacher, researcher, and the founder of the Teachers Advocacy Group (TAG), which has about 7,500 members on Facebook. TAG has become a forum for discussion and information-sharing among teachers, particularly in the early childhood sector, who are concerned about being made to return to work while there is still a risk that they will be exposed to COVID-19.

Bates has written extensively on the risks posed to child health and wellbeing, by the poor conditions in some of New Zealand's early childhood centres. In a 2016 journal article she noted: "In New Zealand, childcare facilities account for more outbreaks of notifiable and other diseases than acute care hospitals, schools, prisons, and other institutions combined." Poverty and inequality were contributing factors, as well as overcrowding and poor ventilation in ECEs.

She told the WSWS that in the first two years of their lives, children are particularly prone to picking up infections, as their immune system is still developing. Just before the current COVID-19 outbreak, New Zealand was hit by a serious outbreak of RSV (respiratory syncytial virus), which spread through ECEs and left several children hospitalised.

Bates said the Ministry of Education had failed to justify reopening ECEs in Auckland at alert level 3. She said there was limited data about the effects of COVID-19 on children, but the experience internationally showed that even if children "may not get as sick as other people, that's not going to stop them from killing someone in their family."

Teachers and staff were particularly vulnerable because it was impossible to avoid contact with young children. "We already have terrible working conditions, we have terrible pay and everything else, and now we're being tossed out into the front line of the delta

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variant, so that other women can go back to work," Bates said. "It's all because of this idea that if the economy suffers too much then everyone is going to suffer. But COVID can kill us. We're not going to have an economy without the people in it.

"I also don't understand the union backing this return at level 3," she added. The primary teacher union, NZEI Te Riu Roa, which has some members in early childcare, is supporting the government's decision. "I would have thought if the union was protecting its members and had children's rights at the centre of what they do, they would be saying: 'No, I don't think early childhood should be opening until level 2,'" i.e. when the risk of COVID-19 being in the community is deemed to be low.

Some centres are refusing to reopen at level 3, and are prioritising the health of staff and children, Bates explained. Others, however, were placing financial pressure on teachers to return to work. Through the Teachers Advocacy Group, Bates has been urging ECE staff not to work if they don't feel safe, which is their right under the law.

"There's a lot of bullying and misinformation right now," she said. During the lockdown, when ECEs were unable to open, several centres cut teachers' pay by 20 percent. This also happened during last year's lockdown, even though "the law says you cannot have your pay dropped without your consent."

Bates had heard from some teachers who were only paid the equivalent of the government's COVID-19 wage subsidy, which is paid to employers. This is $600 a week for each full-time employee retained and $359 for part-time employees. Teachers had been told their hours were reduced to match the level of the wage subsidy, which was "completely illegal" and had led to significant hardship. "If teachers were getting $1,200 a week in a normal week, and now they're only getting the wage subsidy, it's not like they only have to pay half their mortgage or eat only half their food," Bates said.

Bates bluntly described conditions in many ECEs, particularly those that run as profitable businesses, as "a disaster." Younger teachers frequently moved around different centres, with many leaving the job before gaining their registration, while older teachers were leaving "because they just can't stand to see what the sector has ended up like. That's the mentoring going."

There was "a whole raft" of problems including low pay, overcrowding, understaffing, cold temperatures, and unsafe areas. In addition, "there's no regulation on noise in early childhood, and it's chronically noisy, too much for babies to learn language, too much for us to work in."

Last year, five Discoveries Educare centres in Auckland were shut down by the Ministry of Education after years of complaints by former teachers, one of whom said children were being treated like "caged animals." The Teachers Advocacy Group helped expose conditions in the centres. According to *Stuff*, the Ministry received 26 complaints in 2017 and 2018, focusing on issues including understaffing, high turnover, unhygienic and unsafe conditions, and children "bored out of their skulls."

Bates concluded that "the COVID issues are just another layer on top of every other injustice that we've already been suffering. This is something to push everybody to the edge. We have to stand up somewhere, so let's stand up now."

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