

Far-right protests against New Zealand lockdown

Tom Peters
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On Saturday, around 1,000 people joined a protest by far-right Christian groups, outside the War Memorial Museum in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, against the Labour Party-led government's lockdown. Smaller events were held in Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Gisborne and Nelson.

Like anti-lockdown protests in the United States, Australia and other countries, the Auckland event received blanket media coverage. Its main demand dovetailed with calls from the corporate media and the opposition National Party for the government to abandon its stated goal of eliminating COVID-19 from the community.

New Zealand is one of a small number of countries that has so far avoided mass deaths from the virus. The country went into a "level 4" lockdown (the most stringent level) on August 18, following an outbreak of the highly infectious Delta variant of COVID-19. The lockdown is now limited to Auckland and on September 22, in response to pressure from businesses, and against the advice of health experts, the government eased the restrictions to "level 3."

Today, another 29 cases were announced, following 33 yesterday, bringing the total to 263 known cases active in the community. The city of Hamilton and several nearby towns were placed in a "level 3" lockdown yesterday, after the discovery of two cases in the region—highlighting the danger that the outbreak had spread beyond Auckland.

Saturday's protest was led by Destiny Church and supported by others, including City Impact Church, in a front organisation called the Freedom and Rights Coalition (FRC). In addition to opposing the lockdown, the FRC's Facebook page contains anti-vaccination messages, including one describing the vaccine—falsely—as "medical or scientific experimentation."

Destiny Church leader Brian Tamaki declared on

Facebook in August that he would not get vaccinated, because he believed in "God's protection against plagues and pandemics."

Tamaki, an admirer of Donald Trump, frequently rants against Muslims, immigrants and LGBT people, as well as socialism. Following the March 2019 terror attack, in which fascist Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people at two Christchurch mosques, Tamaki's followers staged a provocative anti-Muslim rally in the city. Soon afterwards, Destiny Church received an avalanche of media attention, when it founded a political party. In the 2020 election, it received just 4,236 votes, 0.1 percent of the total.

Destiny Church recruits members from heavily-exploited layers of the working class, including Maori, and demands steep tithes to fund the Tamakis' opulent lifestyle. Maori and Pacific Island people are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, due to poor health, often associated with poverty.

In the lead-up to Saturday's rally, the *New Zealand Herald* prominently reported that Tamaki had held a meeting with Police Commissioner Andrew Coster, who personally approved the protest, provided that masks were worn. The media covered the event in detail, and reported many of Tamaki's unhinged statements.

In a rambling half-hour harangue, Tamaki denounced director-general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield as "Hitler" and compared pandemic restrictions to "Nazi Germany." Tamaki cynically sought to exploit the financial and mental hardship caused by job losses and pay cuts, during the lockdown. Hundreds of thousands of people were in "despair about their income, their families and their future," he said. This is the result of grossly inadequate government support for workers and small businesses.

Most placards demanded "freedom" for businesses and some opposed vaccine mandates (which the government

has not introduced).

University of Auckland public health expert Dr Colin Tukuitonga, epidemiologist Michael Baker and COVID-19 modeller professor Michael Plank all publicly expressed alarm at the rally, saying it could help to spread the Delta virus. Those present included vulnerable elderly people and children who cannot be vaccinated.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the media the gathering was “morally wrong,” and “illegal,” while opposition National Party leader Judith Collins told Radio NZ it was “very dangerous.”

Notwithstanding the universal denunciations of Tamaki and Destiny Church, from media pundits and politicians, the far-right protesters were undoubtedly emboldened by the growing clamor from big business, media and sections of the political establishment, that people must “learn to live with” COVID-19.

On September 26, all major newspapers published an op-ed by former National Party Prime Minister John Key (now chairman of ANZ Bank) accusing the government of “ruling by fear,” pursuing “the North Korean option,” and turning New Zealand into “a smug hermit kingdom.” This rhetoric is not fundamentally different to that used by Tamaki. Key called for a faster reopening of borders and urged the government to promote the message that “living with the virus is possible, as long as you’re vaccinated.”

In fact, while vaccination is essential, it is not enough to protect everyone from death and serious illness, as long as the virus continues to circulate in the community. Singapore and Israel, which both have over 80 percent of the adult population vaccinated, are experiencing increasing numbers of cases and deaths after lifting restrictions. In New Zealand, the risks are even greater, since only 46 percent of people aged over 12—i.e., 39 percent of the total population—have received both doses of the Pfizer vaccine.

COVID-19 modeller and government advisor, professor Shaun Hendy recently warned that with a vaccination rate of 80 percent for over-12s, New Zealand could still experience 7,000 deaths from the virus, and more than 58,000 hospitalisations over the course of a year. This took into account the use of mitigation measures such as masking, testing, tracing, and the isolation and quarantining of individual cases.

In fact, the situation could be worse, because such an influx would overwhelm the rundown and grossly understaffed public health system. Hospitals have struggled to cope with just a few dozen COVID-19 hospitalisations in Auckland over the past few weeks.

On September 29, National leader Collins released a plan to replace the “elimination strategy” with one of so-called “vigorous suppression.” The plan calls for an end to nationwide lockdowns, once just 70–75 percent of the eligible population is vaccinated.

A growing number of media pundits are furiously urging the government to ditch lockdowns. *Herald* business commentator Fran O’Sullivan lashed out at Hendy’s projections on Twitter, describing him as a “bogus” modeller (she later deleted the Tweet and apologised). Fellow columnist Kerre McIvor wrote yesterday: “If we’re not out of Level 3 this week... I’ll bloody well be signing up to Tamaki’s next protest.”

On September 30, responding to claims by COVID-19 Minister Chris Hipkins, that the government was still aiming to reduce case numbers to zero, Newstalk ZB’s right-wing host Mike Hosking said: “No one believes you.” He suggested the government should “wave the white flag” and join the rest of the world, adding that Britain had reopened and was “having a good time.”

Britain’s lifting of restrictions, in line with Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s criminal policy to let the virus spread and “the bodies pile high,” has led to a catastrophe, with around 800 to 1,000 deaths now being reported per week.

Stuff columnist Luke Malpass declared: “For too long, all the parties have lined up behind the style of government-by-epidemiologist. Now, factors other than health will be more broadly canvassed, and trade-offs around the risk of Covid versus other risks will start to be debated more openly.” In other words, the demands of big business for an end to any barriers on profit-making must be prioritized, ahead of workers’ health and lives.

In response to this pressure, the government is offering assurances to the business elite that it will remove restrictions next year, once an unspecified level of vaccination is reached. Hipkins told TVNZ on September 26 that “actually many of the things John Key is arguing are already happening now,” including plans to move away from nationwide lockdowns, and fewer restrictions at the border.



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