New Zealand government abandons elimination policy for COVID-19

Tom Peters
5 October 2021

Since New Zealand first went into a nationwide lockdown in March 2020, it has been one of a very small handful of countries with a stated policy of eliminating COVID-19 from the community.

On Monday, the Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that this strategy is now being abandoned—in the middle of an outbreak in the largest city, Auckland. She told a press conference that the highly-infectious Delta variant was a "game changer" and the government would be "transitioning from our current strategy into a new way of doing things."

Ardern justified the about-face by saying that "long periods of heavy restrictions has not got us to zero cases... Elimination was important because we didn't have vaccines; now we do, so we can begin to change the way we do things." New Zealand would shift towards using "everyday public health measures" and relying on vaccination.

The announcement was gleefully reported in the media internationally, which insists that there is no alternative to allowing the virus to spread and infect the population, killing large numbers of people. The ruling elites in every country view shutdowns and school closures as an intolerable burden on profits. Their perspective was summed up by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's infamous statement: "No more f...ing lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands."

New Zealand and China, and to some extent Australia, have demonstrated that it is possible to stamp out the virus and protect lives using strict lockdowns and other public health measures. Since the start of the pandemic, just 28 people have died from COVID-19 in New Zealand. The country's record has been cited by workers internationally, including teachers and parents, who are seeking to fight back against the homicidal reopening of schools and workplaces which has led to countless preventable deaths.

Contrary to Ardern's claims, even the Delta variant can be eliminated. New Zealand was on track to eliminate its current outbreak with a strict "level 4" nationwide lockdown imposed on August 18. The total number of active cases in the community peaked at 725 on September 2, then dropped to a low point of just 202 on September 28, as most people had recovered from the infection.

In response to pressure from big business, however, the government lifted the lockdown outside Auckland on September 8, and on September 22 lowered restrictions in the city to "level 3." Against the advice of public health experts, it allowed more than 200,000 people to return to workplaces. Auckland schools and early childhood centres reopened for small groups. Following these changes, the size of the outbreak has again expanded, reaching a total of 350 active cases today.

The government is responding, not by reimposing restrictions, but by further easing the lockdown. Ardern announced that as of this week, people in Auckland can resume outdoor recreational activities, friends can meet outside in small groups, and more children can return to early childcare centres. In coming weeks, more retail outlets will open, and on October 18 the city's schools are scheduled to reopen.

Echoing politicians in the US and other countries, Ardern said the reopening "roadmap" was safe because more people are now vaccinated. She told the media yesterday "the vaccine is a ticket to freedom, it is the most effective tool we have to lower restrictions."

In fact, vaccination alone cannot stop significant numbers of deaths from COVID-19. Even countries where more than 80 percent of the eligible population is vaccinated, such as Singapore and Israel, are experiencing a surge in cases and deaths.

In New Zealand, the risk is much greater because only 39 percent of the total population has been fully vaccinated (48 percent of the eligible population aged over 12). This is lower than in the UK, where up to 1,000 COVID-19 deaths are being reported each week and hospitals are in a state of crisis.

Modelling by Professor Shaun Hendy, one of the Ardern government's key advisors, shows that even with 80 percent of eligible people fully vaccinated, New Zealand could

© World Socialist Web Site

experience 7,000 deaths from the virus, and more than 58,000 hospitalisations over the course of one year.

The hospital system is grossly understaffed and underfunded, and will be quickly swamped in a significant outbreak. Tania Mitchell, chairperson of the College of Critical Care Nurses, told Newshub on Monday: "I'm afraid for the public. I'm afraid for the hospitals, the health service. I'm afraid for my colleagues, our team… that this will be overwhelming for us." New Zealand has 4.6 intensive care beds for every 100,000 people, fewer than the UK (6.4) and Australia (8.9).

Microbiologist Dr Siouxsie Wiles pointed out that any outbreak will hit the poor and working class hardest, telling TVNZ: "What's so distressing about the approach that we're taking is the burden's not going to be felt equally." She pointed out that those calling for lifting restrictions were "the wealthy and the privileged, and that's because they have access to private healthcare and they're not going to be as affected." Wiles was particularly concerned about reopening schools, which have been a major source of infections and deaths internationally.

These comments are especially significant because Wiles had previously broadly supported the government's pandemic policies. In March, she was awarded New Zealander of the Year by Ardern.

The government's decision has undoubtedly come as a shock to many workers, who overwhelmingly support lockdowns. A *New Zealand Herald* poll of 1,000 people in August found that only 13 percent believed the country should "learn to live" with the coronavirus, while 85 percent supported an elimination policy.

An anti-lockdown protest over the weekend by the far-right Destiny Church, which received a huge amount of coverage in the media after police allowed it to go ahead, prompted significant anger among ordinary people. An online petition for the church leader Brian Tamaki to be prosecuted quickly gained almost 150,000 signatures. Yesterday, police laid charges against Tamaki for breaking the lockdown.

There is clearly concern within the political establishment about a resurgence of opposition in the working class. A statement from the Green Party, which is part of the Labour-led coalition government, opposed Ardern's announcement, saying: "Elimination has protected thousands of lives in Aotearoa [NZ]. We have to stay the course to keep everyone safe."

The Greens and the Maori Party highlighted the vulnerability of Maori and Pacific Island people, who have lower vaccination rates and more health problems that increase the danger of severe illness if they get COVID-19. By encouraging the illusion that Labour can be pressured to change course, these parties are trying to ensure that opposition does not get out of hand.

Meanwhile, the "left" *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury, despite denouncing the opposition National Party as "death cult capitalists" for seeking a rapid end to restrictions, has leapt to the defence of Ardern's reopening policy. Basically accepting that it is now impossible to eliminate the virus, he falsely declared: "Delta will become endemic and nothing short of perpetual lockdown will end that. You can't tell double vaccinated people they must curtail their freedom forever."

Working people must reject the abandonment of the elimination strategy, which threatens to unleash mass deaths and severe illnesses. This requires a conscious political break from Labour, the unions, and their apologists.

As the WSWS has warned, Labour, a capitalist party, has never been seriously committed to elimination, and has repeatedly sought to accommodate the demands of big business. In March 2020, the Labour government and the trade union bureaucracy initially opposed the closure of businesses and schools. Ardern was forced to change course and impose one of the world's strictest lockdowns only after the emergence of mass opposition among healthcare workers, teachers and others independently of the unions.

Workers, teachers and parents in New Zealand and internationally should build rank-and-file safety committees and to prepare strikes and other actions in opposition to the reopening of schools and workplaces while COVID-19 is still spreading in Auckland.

We urge readers to attend the upcoming webinar, organised by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication," where scientists, socialists and workers will discuss the necessary steps to stamp out the virus on a global scale.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site