

No retreat from elimination! The New Zealand and international working class must fight to stamp out COVID-19!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The announcement by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern that her Labour Party-led government will no longer pursue an elimination strategy for COVID-19 has provoked considerable shock and anger, as well as significant confusion.

Internationally, working people and public health experts have looked to New Zealand as a model of a more science- and health-based approach to the pandemic. Until now, NZ was one of a small handful of countries, including China, with a policy of responding to any outbreak of COVID-19 by imposing strict lockdowns and other public health measures to reduce case numbers to zero.

Governments in the United States, Europe, Latin America and virtually everywhere else have adopted criminal policies of letting the virus spread, driven by the demands of big business for workplaces and schools to reopen, at the expense of the health and lives of workers. As a result, between 9.9 and 18.5 million people have died from COVID-19, according to the *Economist*.

New Zealand eliminated a nationwide outbreak in 2020 and has largely kept cases out of the community. Just 28 people have died of COVID-19, one of the lowest death tolls in the world. The Labour government, however, has repeatedly sought to accommodate the interests of big business by easing restrictions and lifting lockdowns before it was safe to do so, and by providing multi-billion dollar subsidies and bailouts.

Now, the government has succumbed to intense pressure from the business elite to explicitly abandon elimination. This shift comes in the middle of an outbreak in Auckland, the biggest city, which has now spread into the nearby Waikato region. There are 406 active community cases, with dozens being added every day.

The Socialist Equality Group categorically opposes the government's decision. We call on working people to urgently take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees to oppose any attempt to reopen non-essential workplaces and schools while COVID-19 is spreading in the community, and to fight for a scientific elimination strategy.

All non-essential workers in Auckland and other areas where the virus has spread must isolate themselves at home, with a guarantee that they will continue to be fully paid, until the outbreak is over. This response must be funded by taxing the wealth of the billionaires and corporations, which have continued to profit throughout the pandemic. No expense can be spared to save thousands of lives.

The government is highly conscious that ending elimination is deeply unpopular. Surveys have shown around 80 percent of the country supports the elimination strategy and the use of lockdowns.

Ardern tried to downplay the significance of the decision during Monday's press conference. She said the lockdown in Auckland "has not got us to zero cases. But that is okay. Elimination was important because we didn't have vaccines. Now we do, so we can begin to change the way we do things."

When a reporter asked: "the public health experts think elimination is still possible, so why abandon it now?" Ardern replied: "We're in a transition, so I think it's a bit too crude... to simply say we're abandoning our approach."

No one should be fooled by this attempt to fudge what is happening. Plainly, it is not possible to simultaneously maintain an elimination strategy and transition away from it.

On Wednesday, Minister for COVID-19 Response Chris Hipkins reiterated: "Our strategy to date of keeping COVID-19 out has served us well, but we can't keep doing that forever. As the prime minister said on Monday, getting back to zero cases of COVID-19 in the community is unlikely. We need to prepare for a gradual transition to the next phase of our COVID-19 response."

Ardern's announcement was preceded by a campaign in the New Zealand media demanding that the government "admit" that elimination has failed and the country must "learn to live with" the virus; that is, to accept large numbers of deaths and hospitalisations. In late September, former National Party Prime Minister John Key wrote a widely-syndicated column against the elimination approach, accusing the government of turning the country into a "hermit kingdom" like North Korea.

The international corporate media greeted Ardern's announcement with triumphalism. Britain's *Daily Telegraph* said she had "acknowledged something most other leaders did long ago: her government may never completely get rid of the coronavirus." The *New York Times* similarly said Ardern had "acknowledged an end to the elimination strategy seven weeks into a lockdown that has failed to halt an outbreak of the Delta variant."

The *Times* falsely said Ardern was responding to "public discontent." As evidence, it pointed to an anti-lockdown protest held two days before Ardern's announcement, without mentioning

that the event was organised by the extreme right-wing Destiny Church, and opposed by the vast majority of the population.

In fact, the government is moving rapidly—not gradually—to loosen the lockdown, despite signs that it was succeeding in lowering case numbers. On September 22, when Auckland's "alert level" was lowered from 4 (the strictest lockdown) to 3, the total size of the outbreak was 272 cases. Then as many as 300,000 more people returned to workplaces, and schools and early childcare centres partially reopened. The number of active community cases increased to 406, as of today.

This week, the government allowed more children to return to early childcare, and Auckland residents to gather in small groups outdoors and engage in activities like swimming and hunting. Schools are set to reopen on October 18, and there are plans to reopen more retail and hospitality businesses, and public buildings, in coming weeks.

New Zealand scientists have warned that these moves could lead to the spread of COVID-19 throughout the country. Epidemiologist Michael Baker told Radio NZ that "all New Zealanders should plan to encounter this virus in the next couple of months and act accordingly."

Microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles wrote in the *Spinoff* that she was "gutted when the prime minister announced on Monday her roadmap out of our current restrictions," which "signalled a pragmatic transition from the elimination strategy to one of suppression." Wiles told the *Guardian* that reopening would be felt differently by different classes: the "wealthy and privileged are going to still live a wealthy and privileged life, where they may not be touched—compared to other communities that may well end up being devastated by it."

The government's own commissioned modelling shows that, without lockdowns, even with 80 percent of the eligible population (those aged over 12) vaccinated there could be 7,000 deaths and 58,000 hospitalisations in the space of a year.

At present, just 42 percent of the total population is fully vaccinated—less than in the US and UK, which are experiencing an explosion of COVID-19 cases and deaths after lifting restrictions. Vaccination rates are particularly low in working class areas and among Maori, who have much higher rates of poverty and poor health. New Zealand's vaccine rollout was delayed by the government, which decided to only source vaccines from Pfizer and signed contracts with the company at the end of 2020. Vaccinations only began to ramp up following the August lockdown.

Contrary to the media's narrative, the Labour Party-led government has never been seriously committed to an elimination strategy. On March 19, 2020, as New Zealand was being hit with the first wave of the pandemic, with 28 cases identified in the country, director-general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield told the media that the government was not discussing a nationwide lockdown. The following day, Ardern told Newstalk ZB there was no plan to close schools.

The government only changed its position and announced a lockdown on March 23 out of fear of an incipient movement in the working class, emerging outside the control of the corporatist unions. Two separate online petitions started by doctors had

quickly gained a combined 150,000 signatures backing the demand for an immediate lockdown. The teacher and nurses' unions opposed the demand for a lockdown until the day Ardern announced it.

In country after country, the pattern was the same: governments only imposed lockdowns and other restrictions grudgingly, in response to wildcat strikes, walkouts and other protest actions taken outside of the unions. In the US and other countries, the unions are now playing a central role in enforcing the reopening of schools, while Delta spreads out of control.

The Socialist Equality Group warns that it is fatal to hope that Labour can be pressured by appeals to reverse course. This is the illusion cultivated by the Green Party, Labour's coalition partner in the government, which issued a statement appealing for the government to keep its elimination goal.

The Ardern government is riding roughshod over public sentiment and obeying the dictates of the financial and business elite. Powerful interests have determined that New Zealand must no longer serve as an example demonstrating that the virus can be eliminated. It is joining other governments, such as Australia and Singapore, that previously adopted stringent measures against the pandemic, but are one by one abandoning these strategies and allowing the virus to spread.

The fight for elimination now depends directly on the building of a movement of the working class, which is the only force in society with no interest in the defence of capitalist profits at the cost of unending deaths. Workers—including teachers, healthcare workers, parents and young people—must organise independently of the entire political establishment to defend their safety and protect lives.

This requires a complete break from the trade unions, which are supporting the reopening drive in every country, including New Zealand. These organisations do not represent working people, but are closely allied to the political establishment and big business, and have acted as enforcers for austerity and mass redundancies over the past two years.

Workers must build new organisations that they control, to organise a global fightback against the homicidal policies of the ruling elite. The way forward was indicated by the October 1 parents' strike in Britain, which was organised outside and in opposition to the unions and established parties, and received strong international support.

We urge readers to attend the upcoming webinar "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication," hosted by the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which will discuss the science of the pandemic and the measures that must be taken to put an end to it, and to save millions of lives.



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