

New Zealand COVID-19 outbreak grows after restrictions eased

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In the week since Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that New Zealand would be “transitioning” away from its previous strategy of eliminating COVID-19, with more restrictions in Auckland to be lifted, the outbreak of the highly-infectious Delta variant has continued to rapidly expand.

On Sunday, 60 new cases were reported, the highest daily figure since September 1. This was followed by 35 on Monday and 43 today, bringing the total active cases to 469—an increase of 175 in the space of a week.

With thousands of workers permitted to travel to and from Auckland, people have recently tested positive for the virus in the neighbouring Waikato and Northland regions, prompting the government to extend the “level 3” lockdown to those regions.

The outbreak was initially detected on August 17 and the country went into a strict level 4 lockdown the next day. Since then, however, the lockdown has been lifted in most of the country, while in Auckland it was eased to “level 3” on September 22, allowing up to 300,000 people to return to workplaces.

The media and the Labour Party-led government claim that the level 4 lockdown, among the strictest in the world, wasn’t working. This is a lie. The size of the outbreak shrank from a high point of 731 active cases on September 3, to just 202 cases on September 28, as the vast majority had recovered. Since then, however, the relaxation of restrictions has caused case numbers to more than double.

The number of daily reported cases that were infectious in the community (i.e. not isolated at home) prior to being tested has also increased, from single figures prior to September 22, to between 20 and 31 in recent days. The total number of unlinked cases in the past 14 days (where the source of transmission is not known) stands at 74, compared with just seven on

September 22.

Amid this expanding outbreak, the government’s decision to abandon elimination has triggered alarm among public health experts, doctors, teachers and other workers, both in New Zealand and internationally. The decision was not based on scientific advice, but on the requirements of big business, which has demanded—via the corporate media and the opposition National Party—that the government reopen the schools and workplaces before it is safe to do so.

Ardern yesterday backed down from her announcement a week earlier that the government planned to reopen schools in Auckland on October 18. Radio NZ reported on October 7 that the reopening threatened to provoke “a teacher backlash,” based on members’ feedback to the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association. The government has not decided on a new date for reopening.

The Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) Auckland region chairperson Michael Cabral-Tarry said “a good prerequisite [for schools reopening] might be 80 percent [of eligible people fully vaccinated] in those communities where Delta is still rampant.” The unions are also supporting a vaccine mandate for school staff. These measures would still leave many people unvaccinated, including all children aged under 12, and would not be sufficient to stop outbreaks.

Public health experts have spoken out against the government’s easing of restrictions in Auckland, which includes allowing people from different households to meet, and allowing outdoor recreational activities to resume. The government has forecast that it intends to allow retail and hospitality outlets to open in coming weeks.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told the *Guardian*

yesterday that the country's outbreak was "on an exponential growth curve." If the government loosened restrictions, "there's only one way [case numbers] can go and that's up. This is really simple. This is where every epidemiologist and disease modeller will agree 100 percent. Don't do it."

University of Otago senior lecturer Lesley Gray told Radio NZ on October 9: "Loosening alert levels at a time when we frankly do not have high enough vaccination rates, full stop, seems to be a very risky strategy." She said the virus had already spread out of Auckland and further spread could be expected, adding that "we as a population should not really be prepared to accept this."

Just 47 percent of the total population has received both shots of the Pfizer vaccine. The rate among Maori, who are among the most impoverished sections of the working class, is just over 30 percent.

Epidemiologist professor Nick Wilson told *Stuff* yesterday: "The government seems to be throwing up its hands," with no clear direction after giving up on elimination. He called for a stronger border around Auckland and between the North and South Islands.

Professor Rod Jackson agreed, saying no one should travel to the South Island without being fully vaccinated and tested. He also warned that a 90 percent vaccination rate was "not good enough" to stop the disease from spreading, adding: "You don't want people with COVID getting in until you are 95 percent vaccinated."

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives are at risk if case numbers continue to expand at the present rate.

Andrew Stapleton, chair of the College of Intensive Care Medicine, told *Stuff* on October 7 that hospitals would not be able to cope with any surge in COVID-19 patients, unless another level 4 lockdown is imposed to reduce the overall burden of hospital admissions.

Dr Alex Psirides, from the Australia and New Zealand Intensive Care Society, told Newshub he was "afraid of the healthcare system I work in being overwhelmed" if case numbers get out of control. New Zealand has 324 staffed ICU beds at present, with 67 percent occupied. The number of ICU beds per capita is less than Australia and the UK, where hospitals have been thrown into crisis by COVID-19.

Despite these warnings, including from scientists who have advised the government in the past, Ardern told

Radio NZ yesterday: "What we are doing today is no different to what we were doing on day one of this outbreak. We continue to work really hard to aggressively stamp out every case that we have."

No one should be taken in by such manifestly false assurances, which fly in the face of what is happening in Auckland and elsewhere. The Labour government's abandonment of elimination, at the behest of big business and with the support of the trade unions, underscores the urgent need for working people to organise themselves independently and fight for the elimination of COVID-19 in New Zealand, as part of an international strategy to eradicate the virus.

We encourage all our readers to attend the upcoming webinar, "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication," where workers and scientists will discuss the steps that must be taken, on Monday October 25 at 6:00 a.m. New Zealand time.



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