

New Zealand early childhood teachers concerned about reopening during COVID-19 outbreak

Tom Peters
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Today, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government reported 71 new infections linked to the Auckland outbreak of COVID-19, bringing the total known active cases to 617. The highly-infectious Delta variant has entered the Waikato and Northland regions, which are in lockdown, and experts have warned it will likely spread further across the country.

The outbreak has nearly tripled in size over the past three weeks, after the government reduced restrictions in Auckland from a strict "level 4" lockdown to "level 3." This allowed up to 300,000 people to return to work.

Early childhood centres and schools were reopened for small groups of children. Yesterday's new cases included one early childhood teacher. The government has not named the centre affected, saying the risk is limited to 11 close contacts.

Experts have pleaded with the government to reinstate a level 4 lockdown in Auckland. Epidemiologist Dr Amanda Kvalsvig told the Science Media Centre that level 4 was "the best and probably only chance of reversing these highly-concerning trends" in Auckland, and that "failing to act decisively will have severe consequences for population health and wellbeing." Only 49 percent of the population is vaccinated, which increases the risks.

On October 4, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a "transition" away from New Zealand's elimination strategy, which aimed to reduce COVID-19 cases to zero, and has limited total deaths from the virus to just 28. As in other countries, big business has urged the government to remove public health restrictions, so it can return to making full profits.

During a tense press conference yesterday,

COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins declared that a move back to level 4 in Auckland was not being considered. He also admitted that "we are likely to see quite significant growth in the number of cases" in coming days and weeks.

One reporter pointed out that experts, who warned that reopening early childhood education (ECE) would put people at risk, have been proven correct. Hipkins responded dismissively, saying: "Almost anything, at this point, is a risk." He insisted that centres had to reopen to "alleviate pressures," without elaborating.

The government's actions have provoked widespread concern and opposition among ECE teachers. One post in the Teachers Advocacy Group on Facebook said: "When is this madness going to stop? It is not safe for all parties involved for ECE centres to be open at L3 when there are community cases. Why is our government choosing to ignore epidemiologist advice warning that infection cannot be controlled in the early childhood and school environment?"

Another teacher wrote: "Protecting our youngest citizens when restrictions are relaxed and we accept COVID as part of our lives really worries me. I'm glad 5–12-year-olds look like they will be offered vaccines soon, but so worried about the young children in my centre and my grandchildren. COVID has not been around long enough for us to know how even mild cases affect children over their lifetime."

Jay Fowles, a teacher in Hamilton, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the claim from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Health "that ECE centres can open safely in level 3, where community cases are still present, is completely untrue. Children are sensory learners and no amount of cleaning will

counteract the number of things that children put in their mouths."

She added that illnesses were common in ECE settings and "kaiako [teachers] are being put under pressure to make a call on whether symptoms shown by children are from a virus or allergies. From experience, and reading what other kaiako are saying, there can be pressure to choose the latter to avoid upsetting parents."

An Auckland-based teacher, Caroline (not her real name), told the WSWS that the MoE had advised teachers that children with symptoms similar to COVID-19 would not necessarily need to be sent home, because it might be hay fever.

"We really feel like we're not protected," she said. Caroline added that scientists, including epidemiologist Michael Baker and microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles, had criticised the easing of public health restrictions, and Dr. Mike Bedford and researcher Susan Bates had specifically warned about the risks in ECEs.

"If they're coming out publicly and saying, 'I'm really uncomfortable with this,' that makes me uncomfortable," Caroline stated. She noted that the ministry had issued advice about cleaning in ECEs, but this would do little to stop the virus spreading: "We have a baby who's teething, who's dribbling. You clean, they dribble. They also bit another teacher, because that's what they do."

Caroline also questioned official claims that the virus poses a low risk to children. In the United States, she pointed out, "they've seen paediatric hospitalisations go up, they're starting to see long-COVID in children." Statistics were being used in a "spin-doctorish" way "to justify putting us back on the firing line so that the economy can get going again."

While Caroline praised her own employer, she commented that teachers as a whole felt they were "treated as expendable baby-sitters. We are so dispensable and so undervalued."

Although many Auckland centres have reopened, others have chosen to remain shut for health and safety reasons. This includes the Small Kauri Education Centre in Mangere Bridge, South Auckland, an area hit hard by COVID-19. Linda Petrenko, a teacher with more than 40 years' experience and the owner of the centre, told the WSWS that the nearby supermarket and service station were locations where the virus had been

transmitted.

Highlighting the risks of illnesses spreading rapidly in ECEs, Petrenko said before Auckland went into lockdown on August 18, about 93 percent of children and all teachers at her centre had become ill during a nationwide outbreak of RSV (respiratory syncytial virus).

She explained that COVID-19 vaccine mandates for teachers were not sufficient. "My whole team is vaccinated, but if your parent body is not vaccinated, then why would you say it is safe to reopen?" She added that children can catch the virus, even from someone who is vaccinated, and spread it to unvaccinated people.

Based on comments by teachers on social media, Petrenko believed "there are a lot of teachers working in situations where they're being placed at risk... I've been operating for 18 or 19 years and I haven't been driven by it being a business or making a profit; I'm an educationalist." Some early childhood businesses cut wages during the lockdown, despite being highly profitable and claiming wage subsidies from the government. "The Ministry of Business and the Ministry of Education should know about those things, and they're doing nothing about it," Petrenko said.

According to *Stuff*, a survey by the NZEI Te Riu Roa union of 340 teachers found that 20 percent had their pay cut to 80 percent under level 3 restrictions, and 13 percent had pay reduced below 80 percent. Fifteen percent said they were forced to use annual leave, which violates the law.

The unions, however, have refused to launch any campaign against the dangerous lowering of restrictions in Auckland, and the push to reopen schools, ECEs and businesses, while the Delta virus continues to spread out of control.



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