

New Zealand government ignores scientists' calls to increase COVID-19 restrictions

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The outbreak of COVID-19 in New Zealand is continuing to expand rapidly, following the Labour Party-led government's decisions to ease lockdown restrictions in Auckland and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's announcement on October 4 that the previous elimination policy will be abandoned. Cases have been found in the Waikato and Northland regions, which have spent several days in lockdown.

There are 633 active cases linked to the Delta outbreak, which has more than doubled in size since the strict "level 4" lockdown in Auckland was eased to "level 3," on September 22, allowing hundreds of thousands of people to return to work. More restrictions were lifted on October 6, allowing more children to return to early childcare, people from different households to meet outdoors, and the resumption of recreational activities.

Last week saw an average of 51.5 new cases per day. In the seven days before the drop to "level 3," the daily average was just 16.8 cases.

The government is prioritising the demands of big business over public health. As in every country, the New Zealand ruling elite has determined that it can no longer tolerate the disruption caused by lockdowns to its extraction of profits from the working class. Hence the insistence from the corporate media that the population must "learn to live" with the deadly virus spreading in the community, that is, to accept a growing number of hospitalisations, long-term illnesses, and deaths.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported on Friday that Ardern said the outbreak had grown "at a pace that is beyond what we have expected." Today, however, the Cabinet rejected calls from a growing number of scientists for a return to a "level 4" lockdown in Auckland.

COVID-19 modeller professor Shaun Hendy, one of the government's advisors, told the *Herald* that a harder lockdown was needed to stop the spread and allow time for more people to be vaccinated. At present, despite a scramble to boost vaccination rates, just 54 percent of the population has had both doses of the Pfizer vaccine (65 percent of the eligible population aged over 12).

Another modeller, Professor Michael Plank, said without a level 4 lockdown, case numbers could rise to 150 a day by early November, which would mean roughly 100 weekly hospital admissions—threatening to overwhelm the system.

Speaking to TVNZ this morning, Doctor Rawiri Jansen and epidemiologist Rod Jackson both called for a harder lockdown in Auckland to stop cases spiralling out of control. Jackson noted that Ireland, with a similar population to New Zealand, has experienced 5,306 coronavirus deaths, and NZ could see a similar surge if restrictions are eased, particularly given the low rate of vaccination. The now-abandoned elimination strategy has limited deaths to 28, so far.

In comments to the Science Media Centre on October 12, epidemiologist Dr Amanda Kvalsvig pointed out the anti-democratic character of the government's lowering of restrictions. She said: "Before deciding on Aucklanders' behalf that they're too tired of lockdowns, let's hear from Aucklanders. Let's also hear from Māori, Pasifika [Pacific Islanders], people with underlying conditions, people who are marginalised, and children and their advocates."

Māori and Pacific Islanders account for 414 of the active COVID-19 cases, about two thirds of the total. They are more likely to be unvaccinated and to suffer from poverty-related health conditions, making them more vulnerable to the virus.

The government is anticipating a major increase in

cases. The Ministry of Health says in a “worst case scenario” there could be 5,300 cases of COVID-19 per week in Auckland and the northern region of the country alone. This modelling assumes 90 percent of the eligible population are vaccinated, which has not been achieved.

Epidemiologist professor John Potter told Radio NZ on Saturday that New Zealand could face “somewhere between 500 and 2,500 cases a day and 5 to 10 deaths a day” if COVID-19 is allowed to spread at the rate it is in Germany and the UK, with a similar vaccination rate (over 80 percent).

Because of the crisis of capacity in New Zealand’s hospitals, the situation could in fact be much worse. Out of about 7,600 total hospital beds in the country, roughly 83 percent are full at present, and hospitals are frequently over their capacity. According to the Australian and New Zealand Intensive Care Society (ANZICS), there are 186 fully staffed intensive care units (ICUs) in the country. About two thirds of these are occupied. The government claims it can expand ICU capacity to 550 in a crisis, but this would mean shifting healthcare staff and resources away from other patients.

Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland is bracing for a surge in cases by setting up a tent to triage new patients. Public health expert Dr Collin Tukuitonga told *Stuff* that the hospital was “already stretched to [its] full capacity, even without Covid,” and was “underpowered to serve the population size” in the area.

The corporate media, however, continues to agitate for the removal of more restrictions. *Stuff* political editor Luke Malpass wrote on Saturday that it would be “total folly” for the government to listen to “the epidemiological echo chamber” calling for a level 4 lockdown. He suggested there should be “a considerable liberalisation” of restrictions for people entering the country.

Similarly, right-wing Newstalk ZB radio host Mike Hosking last Friday attacked “the so-called experts” calling for level 4, saying they had “lost their heads.” He declared that “elimination is well and truly over” and New Zealand had to make “the big shift [that] the rest of the world has managed seemingly fairly well, [to] living with Covid.”

The local media rarely reports on the disastrous situation in countries where governments have made

this “shift” and allowed the virus to infect hundreds of thousands, or millions of people. The pandemic remains out of control in most of the world. In the last seven days in the United States, 8,887 people died from COVID-19; in the UK, 830 people; and in Australia, 95.

The Ardern government’s retreat from elimination, towards a policy of tolerating the spread of COVID-19, with the full support of the trade unions, demonstrates the need for working people to take matters into their own hands: Independent workplace and neighbourhood safety committees to oppose the reopening of schools and businesses while the virus is spreading in the community.

The Socialist Equality Group is holding a public online meeting on Saturday, at 4:30 p.m. (NZ time) to discuss the dangerous situation in New Zealand and the socialist and scientific strategy needed to fight for elimination of COVID-19 nationally, and eradication on a global scale.



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