

New Zealand government sending thousands back to school during worsening COVID-19 outbreak

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's Labour Party-led government is systematically removing lockdown restrictions in Auckland, the centre of an expanding COVID-19 outbreak, and telling the population that it must accept a major increase in cases.

Yesterday, COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins, who is also Minister of Education, announced that high schools will reopen next week for all students in Years 11 through 13, the three top levels.

This extremely reckless decision will place thousands of students and school staff at risk of contracting COVID-19, getting sick and spreading it to the wider community. Schools have played a major role in the current outbreak, which began in August, with 35 percent of cases in people aged 19 and under.

While the government claims that it is following “public health advice,” in reality its policies are dictated by the demands of big business. It has rejected calls from numerous scientists for a harder lockdown in Auckland, and has already partially reopened schools and early childhood centres.

Internationally, reopening schools is a key demand of the financial and business elite, regardless of the dangers to people's lives. The aim is to pave the way for parents to return to work so that the extraction of profits from the working class can fully resume.

In the United States, where the trade unions have collaborated with the far-right to reopen schools, nearly 2 million children have been infected, 6,523 hospitalized and 200 killed since July 29. No one knows how many teachers have died; the group School Personnel Lost to Covid has counted more than 1,600 deaths. The pandemic has killed more than 748,000 people in the US, and an estimated 15 million

worldwide.

Until recently, New Zealand had been viewed as a model by scientists and working people because of the country's stated policy of eliminating COVID-19. This has so far limited deaths from the coronavirus to just 28. On October 4, however, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced there would be a “transition” away from elimination.

Since September 22, when the government eased the lockdown in Auckland from “alert level 4” to “level 3,” allowing hundreds of thousands of people to return to work, the size of the outbreak has expanded dramatically. Active cases have almost quadrupled from a low point of 202 on September 28, to 868 as of today. Most cases are in Auckland, with 54 in the neighbouring Waikato region.

Hipkins' announcement that more than half of Auckland's high school students can return to school came the day after New Zealand recorded 94 new community cases of COVID-19—the biggest daily increase until today, when 102 cases were reported.

Speaking to Radio NZ, Hipkins casually declared that case numbers are expected to double “every two weeks,” with the daily rate soon to exceed 200. University of Auckland infectious diseases expert Mark Thomas told *Stuff* that he expected “we will see more than 500 cases daily.”

This will mean a surge in hospitalisations and deaths. There are currently 46 people with COVID-19 in hospital. An emergency nurse told Radio NZ that hospital workers are “feeling really anxious. They feel like there's a tsunami coming.” As it currently stands, her department is short by three or four staff on a regular basis.

Dr Dion O’Neale, a COVID-19 modeller who has advised the government, told Radio NZ a “relatively small increase in the number of infections in schools” risked causing a “much greater” rise in community transmission.

O’Neale warned that current mitigation measures in schools, including advice to wash hands and to stay home if unwell, are “at the absolute lower end of what we’d expect to be put in place to reduce transmission.” He called for air filtration systems, better ventilation, and widespread testing of students.

Vaccination is mandatory for school staff. Students are required to wear masks, but not to be vaccinated. By itself, vaccination is not enough to prevent transmission. New Zealand’s level of vaccination—just 55 percent of the total population has received both doses—is lower than countries such as the UK and US, where COVID-19 is spreading rapidly and killing hundreds or thousands of people every week.

The Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA), clearly under pressure from teachers, said many were “dismayed and angry” that schools are being reopened in the middle of the surge in cases. President Melanie Webber said the government “seems to have gone from acting out of an abundance of caution, to a reckless disregard for the consequences, in the blink of an eyelid.”

The union, however, has not called strike action to protect teachers and students. Following the initial outbreak in March 2020, the PPTA opposed calls from teachers and healthcare workers for schools to be shut, with Webber falsely declaring that they were “safe places.” The union only changed its position on the day that Ardern announced a nationwide lockdown.

A parent in Auckland, whose wife is a teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Labour government had proved to be “the wolf in sheep’s clothes. They obviously gave up on elimination... and the strategy was to blame the public for not following the rules.” He said the city should have remained in a level 4 lockdown, with any reopening linked to vaccine mandates.

“The PPTA has made noises this time... but I doubt they’ll do anything when push comes to shove,” he said. His household bubble includes two older people, one with severe respiratory issues. His wife is waiting to see what the union will do before returning to work.

When her school’s principal was asked, in a recent staff meeting, what protections were being put in place, they became “flustered and couldn’t answer the question properly.”

The government is set to reveal more reopening plans in coming days, amid growing pressure from big business and the media for the lockdown to be ditched. The opposition National Party wants December 1 to be designated as “Freedom Day” with the wholesale lifting of restrictions. The term “Freedom Day” was used by the British government to promote its July 19 reopening—a homicidal policy that led to a surge in cases and hundreds of deaths per week.

The Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand calls on workers, including parents and teachers, to oppose the reopening of schools while COVID-19 continues to spread. We urge readers to attend and help promote our online meeting on Saturday at 4:30 p.m., which will explain the need for rank-and-file workplace and neighbourhood safety committees, independent of the unions, to fight for a scientific policy to eliminate the virus. Speakers will discuss the important example set by parents in the UK, who have carried out two school strikes in opposition to the Johnson government’s reopening policy.



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