

New Zealand COVID-19 cases surge as government plans to lift more restrictions

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On Monday, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced an “in principle” decision to remove more COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city. On November 10, retail businesses and public facilities such as libraries will reopen, and outdoor gatherings of up to 25 people will be allowed.

This is another reckless decision that will accelerate the spread of the deadly virus. There are now 2,139 active cases—a nearly tenfold increase since September 22, when the Labour Party-led government eased Auckland’s lockdown from “level 4,” the strictest, to “level 3.”

Hundreds of thousands of people returned to workplaces and thousands of secondary school students to classrooms, fuelling the outbreak. Parts of the Northland and Waikato regions are in a “level 3” lockdown after cases spread from Auckland. Christchurch, in the South Island, is not under lockdown despite four active cases being found there last week.

Three Auckland high schools (Macleans College, Mount Albert Grammar and Liston College) and one primary school, which had partially reopened, were forced to close this week after positive cases were found among students and staff.

There are currently 64 people in hospital with COVID-19—the biggest number so far in the pandemic—compared with just 13 on September 22. This includes three residents of the Edmonton Meadows aged care facility, where 15 residents and four staff tested positive.

Yesterday, an Auckland resident who had tested positive on October 24, died while self-isolating at home. The cause of death has not yet been confirmed, but it highlights the fact that management of positive

cases has been significantly loosened.

When the lockdown began in mid-August, most positive cases were isolated in special quarantine hotels if they did not require hospitalisation. These facilities are currently accommodating only 294 people, with everyone else instructed to self-isolate at home.

Ardern told the media on Monday that case numbers were “within some of our expectations and modelling” and that “public health” officials said reopening retail was unlikely to cause a “marked increase in new cases.”

In fact, the government’s own modelling predicts a continued surge. Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield said that by the end of this month there could be more than 1,400 new cases per week, and the number of people in hospital will be 150, with 20 in intensive care. This morning, Bloomfield revealed to TVNZ that he had advised the government not to ease restrictions next week.

The government is deliberately letting the outbreak expand out of control, ignoring the pleas from scientists and public health experts for tighter restrictions. Ardern announced on October 4 that the government was “transitioning” away from its previous policy of eliminating COVID-19, which has so far limited New Zealand’s death toll to just 28.

The elimination policy was supported by scientists and working people internationally, who viewed NZ as a model, in contrast to the “let it rip” policies adopted in most other countries, which are responsible for an estimated 16 million deaths worldwide.

The Labour government has caved in to the pressure from big business, which insists that the working class must accept COVID-19 becoming endemic as the “new normal.” No country can be allowed to stand as an example showing that the disease can be eliminated

and millions of lives saved, if public health is prioritised over private profit.

On Monday, COVID-19 modeller professor Shaun Hendy, who has provided advice to the government, called for a return to a “level 4” lockdown in Auckland, saying the case numbers and hospitalisations were “concerning.” He told TVNZ: “If we get up to 200 to 300 cases [a day] that will put a lot of strain on the healthcare system in Auckland.”

Contact tracing is not keeping up with the outbreak, resulting in a growing number of unlinked cases. As of yesterday there were 441 cases with no known source, up from about 20 a month ago. Without a lockdown, this will make it impossible to stop the virus from spreading.

Epidemiologist Professor Michael Baker told TVNZ on Tuesday he was “concerned about any relaxation of controls at the moment in Auckland,” while cases were rising. Speaking to Newshub last Saturday, Baker also raised concerns about the government’s plan to fully reopen primary schools on November 15, saying it could lead to cases of Long COVID in unvaccinated children.

Overall, 74 percent of people aged over 12 are fully vaccinated, i.e. 62 percent of the total population. Singapore and Australia, which have a higher vaccination rate and have been touted as models by the New Zealand media, are both experiencing a surge in cases, with 91 and 103 COVID-19 deaths respectively in the past seven days, according to the Worldometers website.

Doctor Rawiri Jansen, a public health expert working with the National Maori Pandemic Group, told Radio NZ on Tuesday that he had a “feeling of impending doom” and the government’s decisions would create a “perfect f---ing storm.” Maori account for about half of the current cases and have a lower vaccination rate.

According to *Stuff*, the Ministry of Health says there are 284 intensive care or high dependency units across the country. Around 62 percent of ICUs, and 83 percent of all hospital beds are currently occupied.

Whangarei Hospital, the main hospital in Northland, is severely dilapidated and overcrowded. Radio NZ reported that since 2017, overall demand for emergency care, intensive care and inpatient services has surpassed capacity. Emergency medicine consultant Dr Gary Payinda said: “If on a regular day we can’t cope with

patient demand, how the heck could we possibly be expected to cope with a surge [from coronavirus]?”

There is considerable unease in the working class over the decision to lower restrictions. Surveys in August and September found a significant majority supported “level 4” lockdowns and an elimination strategy. *Stuff* reported today, however, that its recent poll of nearly 10,000 Auckland residents found that 43 percent now “believed authorities had done a terrible or bad job at managing the outbreak.”

Meanwhile, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests are continuing, organised by the extremely unpopular Destiny Church and similar groups. The latest gathering in Auckland last Saturday reportedly attracted 5,000 people—up from 1,000 at a protest one month ago.

The far-right rallies are being emboldened by sections of the political and business establishment and the media. This morning, Newstalk ZB’s Kate Hawkesby suggested that “there is sympathy for them, especially in Auckland, where everyone’s a bit grumpy and a bit over [the lockdown].”

The business group Retail NZ, and several business associations in Auckland, wrote to Ardern last week demanding the “urgent” reopening of businesses. Yesterday, on Newshub, opposition National Party leader Judith Collins criticised the government for not considering “localised” lockdowns in particular suburbs, essentially calling for an end to the Auckland lockdown.



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