

New Zealand government lifts more restrictions, says COVID-19 will spread nationwide

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10 November 2021

On Monday, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that her Labour Party-led government expects to end the lockdown in Auckland at the end of the month. Despite the city being at the centre of a worsening outbreak of the Delta variant of COVID-19, the government yesterday allowed retail businesses and public facilities to reopen. Hundreds of people reportedly queued, some for hours, outside shops at Sylvia Park, WestCity and Albany shopping malls.

There are now 3,056 active cases, most of them in Auckland, with 127 in the neighbouring Waikato region, 30 in the largely impoverished and rural Northland region, and four in Christchurch. Deaths from the pandemic have risen to 33 and there are 84 people in hospital.

Ardern stated that reopening retail carried a “low risk” of transmitting COVID-19—which flies in the face of public health experts’ warnings. Professor Michael Plank, a COVID-19 modeller, told Radio NZ that the move was “risky” while cases were “still rising quite sharply, doubling around every 12 days.” He noted that 700 community cases in the past 14 days were unlinked, meaning the source of infection is not known and contact tracing cannot keep up with the growing spread.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told *Stuff* on Monday that it was “not desirable” to loosen restrictions. Pointing to the exponential rise in cases, he also urged the government not to reopen any more schools. Many high school students have already returned to class, and the government says it will open all schools on November 17.

Director-general of health, Dr Ashley Bloomfield, told the media yesterday that this was safe because “the spread is more likely to happen outside of school settings than inside.” In fact, reopening schools has driven a surge in cases and deaths in the United States, Britain and elsewhere.

Ardern said “all businesses,” including bars and restaurants, are likely to reopen at the end of the month, when Auckland is projected to have 90 percent of residents over 12 years old fully vaccinated. She said “cases will grow, but that is not the only consideration,” and the government was taking into account the needs of businesses—i.e. their demand for an end to any impediments on the extraction of profit from the working class.

So far, 65 percent of New Zealand’s population is fully vaccinated, which is 77 percent of those eligible. The outbreak is spreading largely, but not solely, among the unvaccinated—underscoring the fact that vaccines alone are not enough to stop the pandemic.

The corporate media is celebrating the reopening of retail, with *Stuff*, the *New Zealand Herald* and other outlets provocatively labelling November 29 “Freedom Day.” This phrase was notoriously used by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to describe the homicidal lifting of public health restrictions on July 19. Since then, the UK has recorded over 13,200 deaths from COVID-19 and the virus is being allowed to spread out of control.

New Zealand’s low death toll relative to other countries is due to its adoption in March 2020 of an elimination strategy. Ardern announced on October 4 that there would be a “transition” away from this policy, despite its widespread support in the working class and among public health experts in NZ and internationally.

In the past month, as a result of the decisions to ease restrictions, the number of active cases has expanded almost sevenfold, and the government is telling the population it must accept thousands more, along with inevitable deaths.

Yesterday, COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins made clear that “COVID-19 is not going to remain

contained in Auckland.” He said that Aucklanders will be allowed to travel outside the city over the Christmas holidays, and the rest of the country will be exposed to the virus, as the government abandons the use of lockdowns to stop the spread.

The public health system faces a preventable disaster. *Stuff* reported yesterday that South Auckland general practitioners are having to follow up people with COVID-19 who are isolating at home, because Auckland Regional Public Health, the agency tasked with this job, has become “overwhelmed.”

Meanwhile, far-right, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests are continuing. On Tuesday, about 3,000 people marched through Wellington and rallied outside parliament, calling for an end to public health restrictions and opposing vaccine mandates for teachers, healthcare workers and others.

The protest was led by Destiny Church and supported by similar groups, in a front organisation called the “Freedom and Rights Coalition.” Many people carried New Zealand and Maori nationalist flags, a few held Trump banners and there was at least one QAnon flag. Outside parliament, a speaker denounced the media as “terrorists” and called the lockdown measures a “dictatorship.”

In a rambling Facebook live commentary during the event, Destiny Church co-leader Hannah Tamaki combined anti-lockdown and anti-vaxx demagoguery with denunciations of migrant workers and calls for police to be paid more.

The far-right is being emboldened by the political establishment and the media. Opposition National Party leader Judith Collins told *Stuff* that the government should not “dismiss” the “enormous protest.” She described some of the anti-vaccination messages as “unhelpful,” but said many people there were “sick of the government.” She demanded an “end date” for vaccine mandates to placate those who oppose the measure.

On November 6 the *Herald* published a prominent op-ed from Leo Molloy, a bar and restaurant owner and close friend of Destiny Church’s Brian and Hannah Tamaki. He declared: “We’re going to learn to live with Covid, we have to, just as the remainder of the world has... We don’t need a nanny-state dictatorial Government wiping our snotty nose for us and confining us to barracks any longer.”

Molloy told Newshub yesterday that he will reopen his business on December 1, regardless of whether the government lifts restrictions. He said he had received

“encouragement and positive support from the police.”

As in other countries, the union bureaucracy is seeking to ensure that there is no organised opposition to the return to work and the return to school.

At the Labour Party’s conference last weekend, Richard Wagstaff, president of the Council of Trade Unions (CTU), hailed what he called a “master class in leadership from our Prime Minister and her team.” He made no mention of the dangerous easing of restrictions in Auckland, and instead praised the “tripartisan” collaboration during the pandemic between the CTU, the government and business leaders, saying “we, as a nation, are in this together as a team of five million.”

FIRST Union posted a Facebook message on November 8 stating that “some retail workers are feeling apprehensive and anxious.” Instead of opposing the dangerous return to work, however, the union called on workers and shoppers to wear masks and follow social distancing and other public health guidelines, implying that the reopening could be done safely.

The Post-Primary Teachers’ Association said on October 20 that it was “dismayed and angry” with the partial reopening of secondary schools. But the union refused to organise any industrial action to protect students, staff and their families. Macleans College, Avondale College and Mt Albert Grammar have all closed in the past week after students tested positive for COVID-19. The primary teachers’ union, NZEI Te Riu Roa, has made no statement about the plan to open all schools on November 17, tacitly supporting the government’s decision.

The role of these pro-capitalist organisations underscores the need for workers, including teachers and parents, to take matters into their own hands. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand call on workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, outside of the union structures, to oppose the government’s agenda of spreading COVID-19 throughout the country. Such committees must urgently be set up to stop the reopening of schools and businesses while COVID-19 is out of control, and to fight for the elimination of the deadly virus, both in New Zealand and internationally.



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