

New Zealand's COVID-19 outbreak grows as schools reopen

Tom Peters

18 November 2021

On Wednesday, schools reopened in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, for all remaining primary and secondary students. The top three high school year levels returned to in-person classes late last month. Early childcare centres can now increase the number of children in each group from 10 to a maximum of 20.

The Labour Party-led government is racing to dismantle the city's lockdown as COVID-19 continues to spread rapidly. Last week, retail businesses reopened in the city. Now hundreds of thousands of school staff and students have returned to classrooms, including under-12s who are ineligible for vaccination.

Over the past week, nearly 200 infections were detected per day. There are a total of 4,300 active cases in the community, most of them in Auckland, and 76 people in hospital.

This is up from just 272 cases on September 22, when the government began easing the lockdown, sending hundreds of thousands of Aucklanders back to work. In early October, at the behest of big business and against the advice of scientists, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the country would "transition" away from its previous policy of eliminating COVID-19 from the community.

The deadly virus has since spread to many parts of the country. There are 214 active cases in the Waikato region and 34 in Northland. Today, a suspected infection was reported in the capital, Wellington. Cases have been detected in recent days in Tauranga, Mount Maunganui, Taupo, Thames, Rotorua, Stratford, Levin, Masterton, Palmerston North and Christchurch. None of these places have been locked down.

A six-week lockdown in Waikato ended on Wednesday, with Ardern declaring that the outbreak there was "contained." Waikato reported 17 more infections on Thursday and 30 today.

Education Minister Chris Hipkins said last week "the risk of reopening schools is outweighed by the benefits of kids re-engaging with their learning face-to-face in this context." In fact, the decision has nothing to do with children's wellbeing, but is aimed at forcing parents to go back to work in the interests of corporate profit.

Schools have proven to be major centres for the spread of infection, both in NZ and internationally. This month alone, at least 17 Auckland schools and 3 early childcare centres have reported cases of COVID-19. Most responded with temporary closures.

Claims that children are not seriously at risk from the coronavirus are false. In the United States, more than 700 children have died of COVID-19 and tens of thousands have been hospitalized. In Britain, 110 children have died and more than 69,000 have developed Long COVID, a debilitating illness which can be associated with serious damage to the lungs, heart, kidneys and the brain.

As in other countries, the New Zealand unions are working hand-in-hand with the government to sow complacency and to suppress opposition to the reopening. NZEI Te Riu Roa, the primary teachers union, posted on Facebook on November 11: "The news that schools can start to ease their way back to in-person from next Wednesday is a great sign that we're getting this virus under control again"—a statement that flies in the face of reality.

The Post-Primary Teachers' Association stated on November 10 that the government should "provide clearer, sharper, national guidelines for all schools, particularly around responses to COVID-19 cases occurring in the school community." In October, the union described the reopening of schools as "reckless," but it has not organised any industrial action against the

decision.

Most Auckland primary students will return to school for reduced hours, with social distancing and other mitigation measures being left up to schools to organise. Masks are mandatory in Auckland and Waikato for schoolchildren from Year 4 (ages 7-8) up.

Stan, a parent in Levin, told the *World Socialist Web Site* following the announcement of a positive case in his town: “I am most concerned about under-12s that can’t be vaccinated. Delta is more contagious, lands more people in hospital and affects younger people.”

Stan noted that local school students are not wearing masks, and said “the government’s shift from elimination means that people are taking precautions less seriously and anti-vaxxers have become more vocal.”

Susan Bates, an early childhood education (ECE) teacher, researcher and co-founder of the Teachers Advocacy Group, told the WSWS that she is currently surveying ECE teachers on Facebook about their concerns. Out of more than 100 responses so far, a majority do not feel safe in their workplace.

She criticised the Ministry of Education and NZEI for providing no guidelines or information about ventilation, air filters and other mitigation measures for ECEs. She also questioned whether all cases detected in ECEs were being reported publicly, noting that she had received unconfirmed reports of infections which have not appeared in the media.

Bates welcomed the government’s decision to mandate vaccination for teachers, but said “the fact is that children still aren’t vaccinated, and they’re also likely to be asymptomatic carriers.” The Delta variant can easily be passed on by children to adults, even if children do not show symptoms.

Bates said governments internationally were “trying to normalize mass death” and this must not be allowed to happen in New Zealand. Some of the recently reported deaths in Auckland appeared to be middle aged and elderly people with underlying health problems “left to fend for themselves.”

She added that authorities were “not focusing on our vulnerable communities.” Māori and Pacific islanders are both less likely to be vaccinated, and more likely to suffer from underlying health problems, often related to poverty, putting them at much greater risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

Currently, just 67 percent of all New Zealanders are fully vaccinated; about 82 percent of the eligible population, and just 63 percent of eligible Māori. The government says once 90 percent of people aged over 12 are vaccinated it will cease to use lockdowns to suppress COVID-19. Preparations are underway for Auckland to completely reopen and travel restrictions in and out of the city to be eased next month.

Even if the target is met, it would leave one in four people unvaccinated. Speaking to Radio NZ on Wednesday, epidemiologist Michael Baker warned against the “feeling of exceptionalism in New Zealand about this virus.” He noted that Singapore, with a similar population size and 86 percent of the total population vaccinated, considerably higher than New Zealand’s rate, is seeing thousands of cases and more than 10 deaths per day.

New modelling by the research institute Te Pūnaha Matatini, commissioned by the government, shows that in a worst case scenario after restrictions are lifted, New Zealand could reach 16,000 cases per week by January, with around 800 needing hospital care.

To prevent such a disaster, parents, teachers, and all workers and students must organise workplace safety committees, independent of the trade unions. These must oppose the Labour-Greens government’s dangerous reopening agenda, and fight for a scientific elimination strategy to stamp out cases and save lives, regardless of the cost to big business.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact