

New Zealand: Auckland lockdown to end on December 3 even though Delta surge continues

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern confirmed on Monday that the Labour Party-led government will abandon lockdowns as a means to suppress COVID-19 on December 3. The country will move into a new “traffic light” warning system, officially called a “COVID-19 Protection Framework,” which includes vaccine mandates for many workers, vaccine certificates and some limits on gathering sizes. Schools and businesses can remain open, regardless of the presence of COVID-19 in the community.

Legislation for the new framework was rammed through parliament yesterday under urgency, with little time for public debate. Minister for COVID-19 Response Chris Hipkins rejected a request from the Council for Civil Liberties to release policy advice to justify the new system. The council’s chair Thomas Beagle called this a “disgraceful” anti-democratic decision.

The government also plans to lift the boundary around Auckland on December 15, allowing people to travel to and from the city, which is at the centre of the current outbreak. In mid-January, the border will open for New Zealanders to return from Australia without having to spend any time in a mandatory isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facility. From late April, the border will open to fully vaccinated people from other countries, including tourists.

Last month the government abandoned the elimination strategy that had been in place since March 2020, which used lockdowns and other public health measures to reduce outbreaks to zero cases. This was praised by public health experts and workers internationally. New Zealand has recorded 42 deaths during the pandemic, one of the lowest figures per capita in the world.

Now, however, the New Zealand ruling elite is racing to join the majority of countries in implementing the

criminal “opening up” policy, telling the population they must “live with” the deadly virus.

Case numbers have already surged in Auckland in recent weeks after the government eased the lockdown and schools and retail businesses reopened. There are 5,182 active cases, up from just 260 on October 1. While most cases are in Auckland, there are 284 in Waikato, 35 in Northland, smaller numbers in Taupo, Rotorua, Bay of Plenty, Manawatu and Wairarapa, and four cases in Christchurch in the South Island.

“The hard truth is that Delta is here and it’s not going away,” Ardern said on Monday. She declared that because of vaccines, the new system would be “safer and simpler” than the old one. “The vast majority of people who get COVID in the future will experience mild to moderate symptoms that won’t require hospital-level care,” she said.

In fact, vaccination, while an essential tool for reducing severe illness and deaths, is not enough to prevent significant numbers of hospitalisations and deaths if COVID-19 is allowed to spread. This was underscored by the Ministry of Health’s revelation yesterday that three out of 15 people killed by the Delta variant in New Zealand since the outbreak began in August were fully vaccinated, and two had received their first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

In Portugal, 98 percent of people over 12 years old (86 percent of the total population of 10.3 million) have been vaccinated, one of the highest rates in the world. However, the refusal to pursue an elimination strategy has allowed cases to soar, with more than 16,000 people testing positive and 79 deaths in the last seven days.

New Zealand could face an even worse surge, because just 84 percent of eligible people are vaccinated, or 71 percent of the total population.

The Council of Trade Unions, far from opposing the dangerous abandonment of the elimination policy, has provided advice on the “traffic light” system, working in partnership with the government and the lobby group Business New Zealand. Schools and retail have reopened in Auckland with the full support of the unions. These pro-capitalist organisations are collaborating to remove obstacles to parents returning to work, so that big business can fully resume the extraction of profit from the working class.

Unvaccinated children are particularly at risk of catching and spreading the virus. In the current outbreak, 19 percent of cases are under 10 years old, and 27 of these children have been hospitalised. A further 17 percent of cases and 10 hospitalisations are aged 10-19. Many children who become infected suffer from Long COVID, which can affect brain function and other vital organs.

Epidemiologist Dr Amanda Kvalsvig, from the University of Otago, tweeted on November 22: “I’m very worried about children, and about people not being worried enough about children. Without urgent, decisive action (vaccines; ventilation & masking in schools) we’ll inevitably see rapid and inequitable spread in children. Will Covid become the next rheumatic fever?” New Zealand has high rates of rheumatic fever, particularly among poor children living in substandard housing.

Media commentary has focused on the low vaccination rate among Māori, who make up 16.5 percent of the population. Only 65 percent of eligible Māori are fully vaccinated, and Māori account for 44 percent of cases in the Delta outbreak.

Dr Rawiri Jansen, a general practitioner and public health researcher, told *Stuff* that warnings about high rates of COVID-19 among Māori had been ignored: “The government has deliberately heard certain voices in alignment with certain pressures on them to ease restrictions.”

The majority of unvaccinated people, however, are non-Māori (423,462 people in the category European/Other are not fully vaccinated; compared with 199,355 Māori). The key factors behind low rates are class divisions and the lack of accessible vaccination services in many rural areas. Māori are much more likely to be unemployed and living in poverty, which goes hand-in-hand with worse access to healthcare services, and distrust of state authorities.

For the handful of Māori who live in wealthy or upper middle class Auckland suburbs such as Herne Bay, Newmarket, Devonport, Remuera and Parnell,

vaccination rates are approaching or above 90 percent. By contrast, in the Counties Manukau District Health Board zone, covering working class South Auckland, only 66.9 percent of eligible Māori are fully vaccinated.

The same pattern exists in Wellington: Māori vaccination rates are much higher in wealthy Seatoun and Khandallah, and middle class Ngaio and Aotea, than in poor suburbs like Cannons Creek and Naenae.

In Northland, one of the poorest and most rural areas of the country, only 74 percent of the eligible population is vaccinated, and 60 percent of eligible Māori. Northland-based emergency doctor Gary Payinda warned that this, combined with rundown public health services, is paving the way for an avoidable catastrophe.

The West Coast region of the South Island, which includes many poor and isolated communities and is more than 90 percent white, has a similarly low vaccination rate of 76 percent.

COVID-19 modeller Michael Plank told the Science Media Centre that families going on holiday out of Auckland should consider “not visiting regions or communities with low vaccination rates.” He warned: “Once schools and workplaces go back in the new year, the virus will be able to spread more easily and there is a danger that case numbers could take off with multiple outbreaks across the country.”

The Labour government has brushed aside such warnings. With the crucial assistance of the trade unions, it is prioritising the demands of big business, with policies that will make COVID-19 endemic throughout the country, leading to rising numbers of deaths and severe illnesses.



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