

Delta spreads as New Zealand government ends Auckland lockdown

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Last Friday, Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-Greens coalition government ended what remained of the lockdown in Auckland, allowing all remaining businesses and public venues to reopen. This followed decisions in recent weeks to reopen schools and retail in New Zealand's largest city, which is at the centre of the country's worsening COVID-19 outbreak.

On December 15, the government will lift the boundary around Auckland, allowing people to travel to and from the city with a vaccine certificate or a negative test result.

There are now 6,375 active cases, up from fewer than 300 in September. Nearly 6,000 are in Auckland, and the virus has also spread to 10 other regions. In Waikato, there are 261 active cases; in the Bay of Plenty, 55; Northland, 27; Rotorua/Taupo, 10; Nelson, 20; and smaller numbers in Taranaki, Hawke's Bay, Whanganui, the Midcentral region, and Christchurch.

In October, the government abandoned its elimination strategy, which had kept the country largely free from COVID-19 and reduced deaths to just 26 before the outbreak of the Delta variant began in August. Since then, the virus has killed another 18 people.

The corporate media largely celebrated the reopening of Auckland businesses, with many outlets declaring Friday "Freedom Day," the phrase used by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to promote his government's barbaric policy of removing all public health restrictions and allowing COVID-19 to spread unimpeded.

Government ministers have declared that the Delta variant will spread across the country, which has been moved into a new COVID-19 Protection Framework, referred to as the "traffic light" system. Auckland and some other parts of the North Island are in the "red" setting and the rest of the country in "orange," but the

settings are similar. At "red," gatherings are limited to 100 people, while both levels require masking, social distancing and proof of vaccination to enter venues and workplaces.

COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins told Radio NZ on Friday that the government would only consider imposing "localised" lockdowns if there is "a really quite significant outbreak," without explaining what he meant. The government has just shown that it is willing to end a lockdown with thousands of cases in the community.

The Labour government has not changed any of its plans in response to the emergence of the new, even more transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19. Omicron, first identified last month in South Africa, has spread to dozens of countries, including New Zealand's neighbour Australia. From January 17, vaccinated New Zealanders will be able to return from Australia without needing to stay in a managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) hotel. The government intends to reopen the border for tourism from next May.

On TVNZ on Sunday, Hipkins was asked whether the government would "err on the side of caution and put New Zealand back into lockdown" if Omicron was discovered in the community. The Minister refused to answer, dismissing it as a "hypothetical question."

Ardern told Newshub last week that the new variant was "possibly more severe, possibly milder," and insisted the government was being "cautious." In fact, ditching elimination and removing restrictions will allow Delta, and any other variant, to spread rapidly.

Dr Amanda Kvalsvig, an epidemiologist from the University of Otago, told the Science Media Centre last week that the "traffic light" system was "significantly underpowered for meaningful prevention of Covid-19

outbreaks.” She said the “system puts a very high dependence on vaccination. That’s concerning because as we’ve seen repeatedly in other countries, vaccination alone isn’t enough to stop outbreaks when there are cases in the community.”

Nationwide, 74 percent of the population is vaccinated, which is 88 percent of those eligible. This leaves more than a million people unvaccinated.

In an article for *Newsroom* on Sunday, Dr Kvalsvig and fellow Otago epidemiologists Michael Baker and Nick Wilson wrote: “We should not assume that a state of endemicity is inevitable, sustainable, or desirable.” They pointed to the clear success of the science-based elimination strategy adopted by New Zealand in the first year of the pandemic, and said this “appears to be the optimal health (and probably economic) response to a new emerging pandemic disease with the severity of Covid-19.”

Yet the government’s policy is precisely for COVID-19 to spread nationwide, which, if it is not reversed, will cause the virus to become endemic, with ongoing deaths and severe illness.

Speaking to Radio NZ, microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles urged Aucklanders not to leave the city over the summer, to prevent the virus from spreading to places with low levels of vaccination, such as Northland, parts of Waikato and Tairāwhiti. She warned that “depending on where the virus spreads, we could see a massive rise in cases and hospitalisations.”

Professor Baker also warned on TVNZ that if people from Auckland visited unvaccinated people around the country “that could be a real disaster.”

Children under 12 are not eligible for vaccination and can easily contract and transmit the virus. The Ministry of Education revealed on December 2 that it knew of 75 schools and 56 early learning centres in Auckland that had COVID-19 cases among students or staff between August and December 1. Many affected schools have not been publicly identified and the Ministry told the *New Zealand Herald* the tally was not exhaustive.

A number of schools outside of Auckland, in Waikato, Bay of Plenty, New Plymouth and Nelson, have also reported cases in recent weeks. In many cases they are advised to remain open, and the Ministry says it is unlikely schools with positive cases will close under the “traffic light” system.

The reopening went ahead with the full collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy, including the teacher unions, which transmit and enforce the instructions of the Ministry of Education.

Unite union leader John Crocker said in a statement that workers in the hospitality sector could face “exposure to COVID” and “aggression” from people who refuse to comply with rules around vaccine passes. But Unite did not call on workers to strike against the dangerous return to work policy in a city with thousands of people infected. Instead, Crocker told *Stuff* the government should consider an “increased police presence” around businesses if they are targeted by anti-vaxxers.

Meanwhile, there are growing demands from big business for the government to move faster in lifting restrictions. The opposition National Party’s new leader Christopher Luxon said on Friday that businesses were “still operating under huge restrictions” and Auckland should already be in the “green” setting. This would remove requirements for physical distancing and facemasks on public transport, and would mean no restrictions for businesses and gatherings for both vaccinated people and unvaccinated children.



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