

Third Omicron case found in New Zealand

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New Zealand's ministry of health revealed on Tuesday that a third border-related case of the COVID-19 Omicron variant had been detected inside the country.

The infected person, who has been transferred to a managed isolation and quarantine facility, is a household contact of an Air New Zealand crew member who tested positive with the highly transmissible variant last week. The contact is fully vaccinated and has been in isolation during their symptomatic period. A second household contact, who is also in isolation, continues to test negative.

The Air NZ crew member had arrived on a flight into Auckland from Sydney on December 24, along with three other Omicron cases. The crew member tested positive on December 27 and was transferred to an isolation facility.

Over 90 travellers with Omicron have so far been intercepted at the border, where it is now the most prevalent variant. The first case to get into the country was a disk jockey named Robert Etheridge, who arrived from the UK before Christmas and received a positive test result two days after spending the required seven days in MIQ and three days in "self-isolation" near Auckland.

Etheridge, who was on his third border exemption since the start of the COVID pandemic, failed to wait for the result of his final test before going to restaurants, a bar and a night club, exposing up to 100 close contacts to the Omicron variant.

All of the man's close contacts have returned negative tests. COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins described Etheridge's actions as "disappointing," but authorities have declined to prosecute on the spurious grounds that legal action could damage future COVID-19 carriers from cooperating with the country's public health rules.

While the number of Omicron cases appear for now

to be relatively contained, their emergence beyond the border highlights extreme dangers. The country's Delta outbreak which began last August was sourced from a single case of a returnee on a flight from Sydney.

Internationally, Omicron has fuelled an unprecedented surge in cases since it was identified as a variant of concern in November, and health systems everywhere are being overwhelmed. Australia's COVID-19 infections broke national records this week, with more than 72,000 new cases reported yesterday and a national positive test rate of 31.35 percent, as state and federal governments allow the highly infectious strain to circulate.

The worsening international situation underscores the recklessness of the New Zealand Labour-led government's pre-Christmas removal of the last remaining public health restrictions. Auckland, the country's largest city and centre of the Delta outbreak, had its three-tier "traffic light" setting lowered from red to orange. Thousands of holiday makers have since spread out to provincial areas, seeding likely outbreaks elsewhere.

According to official statistics, the daily COVID-19 case numbers sharply declined over the Christmas and New Year period. From a high of 222 community cases on November 16, daily cases progressively declined to 19 on January 6 with a rolling 7-day average of 35. There are currently 1,081 active cases, 38 in hospital, 4 in ICU with 51 deaths, including three over Christmas.

The figures understate the true situation. Testing virtually ground to a halt over the holiday period. In the last week of December there were 69,217 tests conducted, compared with more than 200,000 tests per week during November. Between Christmas and January 1, there were fewer than 10,000 tests taken daily.

Having ditched its elimination strategy last October, the Labour-Green Party government has no intention of

stopping the Omicron variant from spreading. COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins declared, “It is not our intention to move to lockdowns, unless that is absolutely necessary in the event of a widespread outbreak where our health system comes under considerable strain.”

Like governments internationally, Labour is relying on vaccinations to manage the eruption of cases while cutting back essential public health measures. Booster vaccine doses have this week been made available at walk-in clinics to an estimated 1.2 million people who received their second Pfizer dose four months ago. While fewer than 10 percent of those eligible have had a booster, queues quickly formed over recent days with thousands of people seeking it.

Otago University epidemiologist Michael Baker told *Stuff* on January 5 that Omicron poses a “huge risk” to New Zealand. “We’re highly vulnerable. It would behave like it’s behaving in [the Australian states of] New South Wales and Victoria, it would rapidly sweep through the population,” he said, creating an “intense pandemic wave” that would be very hard to manage.

The decision to push back the border reopening with Australia until the end of February had given two months to prepare for community transmission of Omicron, Baker said. As soon as New Zealanders could travel to Australia the Omicron variant would arrive almost immediately.

“We don’t know how long we’ll keep Omicron out for. At any moment there could be a border failure, and it could start circulating very widely,” Baker declared.

David Welch from Auckland University told the Science Media Centre that the government’s “assumptions” around immunity from vaccinations that underpin the “traffic lights” which replaced broad lockdowns, “do not hold for Omicron.” He called for a massive strengthening of protective measures, including boosting testing and tracing systems, and for rapid antigen tests to be widely and freely available. “COVID is an airborne disease so we need to upgrade ventilation in our schools, workplaces and other indoor environments,” he added.

Despite over a thousand current Delta cases and the possibility that Omicron has already begun to spread, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has adopted the same criminal strategy as capitalist governments around the globe of allowing COVID-19 to become endemic. The

ruling elites are acting on behalf of major corporations, which are demanding that workers sacrifice their health and their lives, so that the extraction of profits can continue uninterrupted.

Facing the prospect of growing popular opposition, already evident late last year among New Zealand education workers and elsewhere, a critical role in politically covering for the Ardern government is being played by the pseudo-left and “liberal” milieu that orbits the government and trade unions.

The house organ of these tendencies, the *Daily Blog*, has conducted a relentless propaganda campaign throughout the pandemic glorifying the government’s strategy, including its deepening alignment with the demands of big business. The blog supported the move to end the Auckland lockdown, while editor Martyn Bradbury falsely declared that “Delta will become endemic and nothing short of perpetual lockdown will end that. You can’t tell double vaccinated people they must curtail their freedom forever.”

Reviewing 2021 last week, Bradbury admitted that Labour had failed to address housing, poverty, inequality and other critical social issues, but Ardern could be let “off the hook.” While “Jacinda’s neokindness is starting to collapse,” Bradbury declared, “if she keeps us safe see [sic] deserves a gratitude vote again in 2023.”



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