

New Zealand COVID-19 experts take action against Auckland University over online abuse

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Two of New Zealand's most prominent COVID-19 experts are taking legal action against their employer, the University of Auckland, for allegedly failing to take steps to protect them against a bombardment of threats and abuse from individuals opposed to vaccination and public health restrictions.

Microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles and COVID-19 modeller Shaun Hendy have provided extensive public commentary and advice to the government during the pandemic. On different occasions, both have criticised the Labour Party-led government for ending lockdowns while COVID-19 was still circulating in the community.

Wiles strongly denounced the decision last October to end New Zealand's elimination strategy, telling the *Guardian* that while the "wealthy and privileged" would be relatively insulated, other communities "may well end up being devastated" by the pandemic. Hendy's modeling provided stark warnings about the mass deaths that could result from allowing COVID-19 to spread without lockdowns and border controls, and relatively low levels of vaccination.

Along with other scientists in New Zealand and internationally, the two have been relentlessly attacked by right-wing conspiracy theorists, and vilified by media commentators and politicians demanding the removal of COVID-19 restrictions.

On September 10 last year, opposition National Party leader Judith Collins attacked Wiles as "a big, fat hypocrite," telling NewstalkZB: "I'm sick and tired of listening to her telling everyone else what to do." In a widely-published op-ed on September 26, former Prime Minister John Key denounced "public health experts" for "making the public fearful."

On December 24, the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) referred Hendy and Wiles' case to the

Employment Court. In its determination, the ERA stated that the pair "have endured harassment that has included (but is not limited to) targeting via email, on social media and video sharing platforms, in person confrontations and threats of physical confrontations.

"Associate Professor Wiles has been the subject of doxing with an associated threat to physically confront her at her home. Professor Hendy has been physically confronted in his office on the University campus by an individual who threatened to 'see him soon.'"

The experts claim that Auckland University breached its obligations under the Academic Staff Collective Agreement and the Health and Safety at Work Act by failing to properly address their safety concerns. When the two experts initially lodged grievances with their employer in July, the ERA said the university replied the following month by recommending that they "keep their public commentary to a minimum and suggested they take paid leave" to minimise the abuse they were receiving.

In other words, the university's proposed solution was for Hendy and Wiles to keep quiet. This was just before New Zealand was hit with an outbreak of the Delta variant of COVID-19, which is continuing to spread throughout the country. Hendy and Wiles refused to be intimidated from making public commentary, which they defended to the ERA as an essential function of their role as scientists during the global pandemic.

The ERA concluded that there was "an urgent need" for the Employment Court "to determine the scope (if any) of the [university's] duty to protect the applicants from their harassers in such circumstances." A hearing date has not yet been announced.

Professor Hendy said the outcome of the Employment Court hearing would be important for himself, Wiles, "and other academics who provide public commentary in

the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also other academics who provide public commentary on unpopular or controversial topics, and therefore may also be the subject of targeted harassment.”

In the case of COVID-19, however, the vast majority of the population, as well as scientists internationally, strongly supported New Zealand’s now-abandoned elimination strategy, including lockdowns and mass vaccination. The anti-vaccination, anti-lockdown campaigners speak for a very small section of society, but one that is promoted by the corporate media, which has always opposed elimination and lockdowns for placing intolerable costs on big business.

The Labour-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has also emboldened these extreme-right elements by embracing the “let it rip” approach to COVID-19. It has falsely declared that the population can “live with” the virus and that vaccinations alone will prevent mass infection and deaths.

In lifting lockdowns and public health restrictions, the government has repeatedly ignored the advice of public health experts. There are currently more than 500 active cases of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in the community, and hundreds more Omicron cases among returned travellers, who are confined to managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) hotels.

Ardern has made clear that the government expects the highly infectious Omicron variant to escape into the community soon, but is insisting that schools must reopen at the end of the summer holidays next month.

Meanwhile anti-vaxxers are making increasingly aggressive threats against scientists, health workers and ordinary people. The *Otago Daily Times* reported on January 6 that University of Otago epidemiologist Michael Baker, a prominent architect of the elimination strategy, received “a few attacks by email every day,” and sometimes abusive phone calls.

Parents and children have faced intimidation outside vaccination centres. A video published by the *New Zealand Herald* showed anti-vax protesters approaching parents and children while they were waiting in line.

In the Beach Haven and Birkdale Community Facebook group, one parent wrote on Tuesday: “I took my children to be vaccinated yesterday at Eventfinda Stadium yesterday—and was incredibly disappointed by the intimidating behaviour of protesters there. Placards and megaphones and people trying to give out anti-vax leaflets. My girls were so scared and upset we had to turn around and go home.”

There is a growing danger of violence. Destiny Church leader Brian Tamaki, a prominent opponent of vaccine mandates and public health measures, threatened during a sermon on December 26 that if mobile vaccination clinics visited schools, “I’ll tow your wagon away and I’ll get the boys to blow it up and all your syringes, we’ll run you out of town.”

Tamaki was arrested on January 17 after speaking at an anti-vax rally in Christchurch attended by more than the 100 people allowed under the current watered-down COVID restrictions. He had previously been arrested for flouting public health restrictions, and is now accused of breaching his bail conditions.

Destiny Church is almost universally reviled by the working class, but its activities are heavily publicised. The *New York Times* fraudulently presented an anti-lockdown rally in Auckland last October as evidence of growing opposition to the elimination strategy. The pseudo-left *Daily Blog*’s contributor John Minto sought to legitimise one of the church’s rallies in Wellington in November in opposition to vaccine mandates.

This promotion of the extreme right serves definite class interests. The political and media establishment, as well as the trade union bureaucracy, represent the rich and the upper middle classes. They insist that schools and workplaces must remain open, no matter what the cost to people’s health and lives, so that corporations can continue to extract profits.

The working class, however, cannot and will not accept the reckless and homicidal reopening agenda, which is producing a catastrophic surge in deaths in the United States, Europe, Australia and elsewhere. Workers, including teachers and parents, must come to the defence of Hendy, Wiles and all scientists and healthcare workers, as part of the fight for a fully-resourced strategy to eliminate COVID-19 in New Zealand and throughout the world.



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