

New Zealand PM declares “We won’t stop Omicron”

Tom Peters
20 January 2022

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern confirmed yesterday that her Labour Party-led government will allow the Omicron variant to circulate once it enters the community, setting the stage for a calamity in New Zealand similar to those unfolding throughout the US, Europe and Australia.

New Zealand has so far recorded 52 deaths from COVID-19, one of the lowest tolls in the world. However, since Ardern announced last October that the government would abandon its strategy to eliminate the deadly virus, it has lifted all lockdowns and allowed the Delta variant to spread.

There are more than 500 known infections in the community. Just over 300 are in Auckland, with the rest scattered across the North Island, plus six cases in Christchurch. Currently 21 COVID-19 patients are in hospital, one in intensive care.

Ardern said the relatively low numbers, compared with other countries, were due to high levels of vaccination and various masking and physical distancing requirements. In fact, while vaccination is crucial, it is not enough to prevent a large number of infections and deaths.

Overall, 76 percent of New Zealand’s population have received at least two doses of the Pfizer vaccine, leaving nearly a million people unvaccinated. Despite Ardern claiming that New Zealand is “in one of the best positions in the world to fight Omicron,” only 17 percent of people have received a third shot, which is essential to provide any protection against Omicron.

The recent decline in daily cases coincides with the summer holidays. The government intends to reopen schools for in-person classes in just over a week, which will inevitably lead to a surge in cases. Vaccines for children aged 5 to 11 only became available on January 17, meaning that large numbers will be attending

school unvaccinated.

In the US, UK, France and Greece, teachers, parents and students have held strikes and walkouts in opposition to the reopening of schools while the pandemic is out of control. These actions are increasingly in defiance of the trade unions, which support the criminal reopening policies.

Omicron could leak into New Zealand at any time. Yesterday, there were 525 cases of COVID-19 in the country’s managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) hotels, where people entering the country must stay for 10 days.

Experts have expressed alarm and called on the government to reduce the number of international arrivals and strengthen protections to avoid an outbreak.

Ardern, however, declared that “we won’t stop Omicron.” She said the government would aim to “keep cases as low as possible, so our health system can manage,” but added: “We will have higher case numbers than we’re used to seeing or have experienced before.”

When an Omicron outbreak is detected, New Zealand will move from “orange” to “red” in its so-called “COVID-19 protection framework.” Vaccine certificates will be required in more places, and limits imposed on indoor gatherings, but schools and businesses will remain open. Ardern stressed that “red does not mean lockdowns or regional boundaries.”

Right-wing columnist Matthew Hooton wrote in today’s *Herald* that Ardern “made the right call.” He said the decision “to move to something like ‘let it rip’ or at least ‘live with it’ will probably cost the lives of a few hundred unvaccinated New Zealanders, plus a handful of others,” but people had to “take responsibility” for themselves and their families.

Like other world leaders, Ardern sought to justify this approach, which puts the interests of big business ahead of workers' lives, by stating that Omicron is "for most people, a mild to moderate illness."

Omicron is not mild. Any putative reduction in severity is more than compensated for by the variant's hugely increased transmissibility.

The death toll and the collapse of health systems in the US, Europe and elsewhere speaks for itself.

In Australia, Omicron killed 376 people in the last 7 days alone, and the numbers are rising rapidly. Hooton pointed out that "in South Australia, the Australian state with rules most similar to ours, 23 people were in ICU yesterday from its population of 1.8 million. Our equivalent would be 65. If the New South Wales experience plays out here, our ICU system will certainly be overwhelmed."

A secret report from the government's COVID-19 advisers, leaked to Māori Television this week, shows that hospitals have just 108 intensive care beds currently available and "no ICU capacity" in the West Coast and Hawke's Bay regions. The report also noted that many widely-used masks are "not sufficient in preventing or reducing infection of Omicron."

University of Otago epidemiologists have written today that modelling suggests "for an outbreak of the Omicron variant in NZ, taking off in January, the number of cases in hospital might peak at 2,790 in early March 2022." There could be 400 cumulative deaths by May 1.

Ardern falsely told reporters that "Omicron makes a strategy of elimination nigh-on-impossible." In fact, China, with 1.4 billion people, is still successfully pursuing a zero COVID policy. The experience of Western Australia also proves that Omicron and Delta can be kept out of the community.

The Labour government, supported by the media and trade unions, insists that there is no alternative to letting Omicron spread. But there is significant unease and opposition to this agenda among working people, including teachers and parents.

A mother of three school age children told the WSWS: "I am deeply concerned about the effects that Omicron will have on educational settings. Teachers will be sitting ducks once the virus hits."

Another parent, in Auckland, said: "Reopening schools will be very, very risky. Any outbreak will be

like wildfire, which will result in very serious consequences beyond the New Zealand health system's capacity. Society will collapse when a large percentage of people become unwell."

In the Teachers Advocacy Group (TAG) on Facebook, a WSWS article highlighting outbreaks in Australian childcare centres got dozens of shares and concerned comments. One said it was "just a matter of time" before New Zealand experienced a similar crisis. Another added: "We are playing Omicron Roulette now."

One teacher commented that five of her family members overseas had caught COVID-19, and "the sheer number of people sick [is] causing huge issues." She said New Zealand had not yet experienced such a situation and "I don't know how they think schools and daycares are going to function when large numbers of staff are either sick or awaiting tests all at the same time."

Susan Bates, a teacher and founder of TAG, told the WSWS "children are super-spreaders" and the pandemic will accelerate once schools restart. She said the government only wanted schools and preschools open "to get parents back at work and the economy rolling," and if people's safety was not prioritized, "then we're just economic pawns, and I for one did not sign up for that."

The WSWS urges teachers, parents and students in New Zealand to attend the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) online public meeting on Sunday, at 1 p.m. NZ time, to oppose the deadly reopening of schools in Australia. The public health nightmare in Australia contains urgent lessons for New Zealand: workers cannot "live with" the virus, they must fight for a global strategy to eliminate COVID-19.



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