

Omicron outbreak in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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On Sunday, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the extremely transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19 is circulating in the community in New Zealand—and confirmed that the Labour Party-led government will do nothing to stop it.

This paves the way for a surge in infections and deaths, as has happened in every country where governments have adopted the murderous “let it rip” policy.

There are currently 19 known Omicron cases. On Sunday, 10 were confirmed in Motueka, in the Nelson-Marlborough region of the South Island. The cases were in a family that attended a wedding and other events in Auckland in mid-January. Another person at the wedding tested positive, and a flight attendant on the same flight as the family from Auckland to Nelson on January 16 also tested positive for the variant.

Officials do not know how Omicron entered the country. There is no known link between the Nelson cases and the border, meaning that it is likely already spreading in Auckland, and potentially Nelson and other areas. Fifteen Air New Zealand workers are in self-isolation as close contacts, and chief executive Greg Foran told Radio NZ that some were showing symptoms.

New Zealand’s COVID-19 “traffic light” setting has moved to “red,” but this is not a lockdown of any sort. Gatherings are now capped at 100 people and there are more rules around the use of masks, physical distancing and vaccine certificates. All businesses remain open, and schools are due to open on January 31.

Ardern has cancelled her planned wedding to TV personality Clarke Gayford due to Omicron. But hundreds of thousands of children will be herded into schools, which have been a major source of COVID-19 infections internationally. Only 20 percent of children aged 5 to 11 in New Zealand have been vaccinated or are booked to be vaccinated with a single dose of

Pfizer, after becoming eligible just one week ago.

In the United States, Canada, France and other countries, teachers, parents and students are walking out and striking in opposition to in-person education. They are defying governments and the trade unions, which insist that schools must reopen to ensure parents stay at work and businesses remain profitable, no matter how many people get sick and die.

Ardern told a press conference yesterday that the government expects “up to 1,000 cases a day” within 14 days. She misleadingly said the government would take a “stamp it out approach,” and “slow the spread and reduce the number of cases” by using contact tracing and isolation.

These measures will not eliminate the virus, nor are they intended to, as Ardern made clear. Once case numbers escalate to “thousands per day,” which is expected in a matter of “weeks,” the government will “make changes to contact tracing, the definition of contacts, and isolation requirements.” This suggests that once these systems are overwhelmed by the number of Omicron cases, people will be compelled to work when they may have been exposed to COVID-19—just as governments in the US, Australia and elsewhere are now doing.

The government has embraced an extraordinarily reckless policy, the opposite of the elimination strategy adopted early in the pandemic, which has kept New Zealand’s death toll relatively low at 52.

Last October, ignoring the advice of public health experts, Ardern announced that the government was ditching elimination. It then proceeded to lift lockdowns, allowing the Delta variant to spread across the country. There are currently 467 known cases of COVID-19 in the community, with the largest clusters in Auckland, Bay of Plenty, Waikato and Rotorua.

In addition, 666 cases of Omicron are among returned travellers isolated in quarantine hotels.

Ardern misleadingly declared that for “most people” Omicron is “a mild to moderate illness,” but added that older people and those with health conditions are at risk of severe illness. The situation internationally proves that Omicron is not mild; it is far more transmissible, and poses significant dangers to people of all ages.

On Friday, the US reported nearly 4,000 deaths and a record 159,000 people in hospital for COVID-19. Children are being admitted to hospital in record numbers in the US, France, UK and other countries.

Australia, which has a similar vaccination rate to New Zealand, has recorded 1.9 million cases since mid-December and more than 800 deaths so far this year, with dozens more every day.

COVID-19 modeller Michael Plank told Radio NZ that up to half of New Zealand’s population of 5.1 million could become infected with Omicron. Microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles said the current public health settings were “not good enough at stopping transmission” and called for the closure of night-clubs and indoor dining.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told *Newshub*: “We will see tens of thousands of cases and unfortunately several hundred deaths in the next three or four months.” He called for a faster rollout of vaccines.

The vast majority of people are not fully vaccinated. Only 23.2 percent of New Zealanders aged over 12 have received a third dose of the Pfizer vaccine, which is essential to significantly reduce the risk of catching and passing on Omicron.

There is a severe shortage of N95 and similar masks, which scientists recommend. COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins told RNZ today that surgical masks, which are much less effective at stopping the virus, are “the best masks for the public’s use.” Ardern said the government is not considering making masks free.

In unleashing the deadly virus on the country, the ruling class is relying on the complicity of the trade unions to suppress opposition from the working class. As in other countries, the teacher unions, the NZEI and PPTA, are collaborating fully with the dangerous reopening of schools.

On January 19, FIRST Union general secretary Dennis Maga told Radio NZ that the union was talking to employers about making rapid antigen tests available “to make sure that we can sustain the operation of

businesses... It’s critical that we have enough workforce to maintain the supply chain.”

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation’s (NZNO) Glenda Alexander told Radio NZ today “we’re as prepared as we can be” for Omicron, despite the crisis of understaffing and underfunding in public hospitals. She said the loss of staff to illness was a “concern” and would “put immense pressure on an already stressed workforce.”

None of the unions has called for a lockdown and a properly funded elimination strategy, such as the policy being pursued in China, which is the only way to stop the virus and save lives. In March 2020, the NZNO and the teacher unions opposed the calls for a lockdown from public health experts and tens of thousands of workers—until it was finally announced by the government, which feared an upsurge in the working class.

The unions are pro-business organisations that support policies which will lead to mass infection and death. In order to stop the reopening of schools, close businesses, and eliminate COVID-19, workers must urgently take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees—independent of the unions and the political establishment. We call on workers to contact us to discuss this perspective.



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