New Zealand schools and public transport will be breeding grounds for Omicron infections

Tom Peters
25 January 2022

The New Zealand government's decision to let the highly-infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 spread across the country has sparked significant anxiety and anger, including among parents and public transport workers.

Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared on Sunday that she expected there would be up to a thousand cases per day within two weeks. No lockdown has been announced, all businesses remain open and schools are due to resume classes for the new year on January 31, creating the conditions for an explosion in case numbers.

So far, 56 community infections of Omicron have been identified. The source of the outbreak is not known, with no firm link to a returned traveller or border worker. There are also more than 400 active community cases of the Delta variant.

The media's propaganda has gone into overdrive, seeking to sow complacency. The *New Zealand Herald* 's editorial today calls for "cautious optimism," saying: "Hopes are rising that Covid-19 is beginning to shift from a pandemic to a more easily manageable endemic illness."

The *Herald* cites government advisers from the US and UK, who declare, based on nothing, that the pandemic is about to end, in order to justify the abandonment of all public health measures. Meanwhile, hospitals are overwhelmed, infections are at an all-time high and thousands of people are dying every day (see: "What 'endemic' COVID-19 really means: Mass infection and death forever").

The New Zealand population is largely unprotected. According to Radio NZ, 76 percent of people have received two doses of the Pfizer vaccine. As of yesterday, only 1,053,055 people, about one in five, had received a third shot, which is essential to provide significant protection against Omicron. Only one in five children aged 5 to 11 have had their first dose, meaning schools will be packed with unvaccinated children.

A parent in Auckland told the WSWS: "Schools are breeding grounds for the virus, which is a proven fact. That will result in more people getting sick, including parents, therefore children will not have healthy adults looking after them." This would be "much more stressful than stress caused by children doing online learning."

In response to claims by Ardern and the media that Omicron is "mild" for "most people," the mother pointed out that even so-called mild cases can produce debilitating long-term conditions, including "neurological damage."

An article published yesterday by Otago University epidemiologist Amanda Kvalsvig and several other experts warned: "High numbers of child cases have led to extreme pressure on paediatric services in some overseas settings… The great majority of NZ children are currently immunologically naïve to Covid-19, suggesting that the impact on children may be even more marked here than in other places."

Mitigation measures in schools are minimal. The experts pointed to current Ministry of Education advice for "staff to decide whether the air feels stuffy and to open windows." They warned that "These protection gaps (together with low mask uptake) indicate that in the presence of high community transmission, NZ buildings may not be safe settings for children to congregate."

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The Ministry announced yesterday that 5,000 air purifiers have been ordered for schools, but the *New Zealand Herald* reported that "only 500 will be here in March, with the remaining 4,500 not due to arrive until winter [i.e. June]. With more than 2500 schools in New Zealand, there won't be enough air cleaners for everyone."

A Wellington father told the WSWS that his children's primary school has not warned parents about the risks of reopening, despite hundreds of cases of Delta in schools in recent months. He was concerned that masks are only required for children in Year 4 (7 or 8 years old) and above.

"Air filters aren't turning up until March, which will be just in time for the next wave. What I think is that schools shouldn't be open, I support an elimination strategy. They haven't done anything at all that would mitigate significantly against disease spread within the classroom."

He described the response of the unions, who are supporting the reopening, as "shocking," given the "life-and-death" situation that people now face.

He noted that New Zealand initially pursued elimination and kept deaths low, but the government has now ditched the successful strategy. This has caused confusion because people "haven't had to deal with the kind of carnage that we have seen overseas." He is considering not sending his partially vaccinated son, who suffers from a chronic respiratory condition, back to school.

The government has announced more stringent masking requirements, saying people can no longer use a scarf or a bandana. However, Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield told the media yesterday: "We're not going to be recommending the use of N95s for the general public… partly because they are expensive and they are harder to get." Over the past two years of the pandemic, the government has refused to take steps to secure enough of these more protective masks.

A bus driver employed by NZ Bus in Wellington told the WSWS: "We really need the P2 and the N95 masks because surgical masks don't cut it." Drivers are currently given "inappropriate masks that don't protect us against COVID" and which are "labelled as non-medical."

The driver pointed out that it is difficult to make passengers wear masks, saying "today I had six kids on my bus, over the age of 12, maskless." Metlink, the council's public transport agency, has refused to supply masks for passengers.

The driver said: "This is a health and safety issue in the workplace, and their excuse is it's going to cost too much money. But the public health outcome is far more costly if people aren't wearing masks. Why should we, in our workplace, be exposed to risks like that?"

She was also "really angry" that drivers were not prioritized for vaccination, meaning many have not yet received their third shot. She said drivers with vulnerable family members, who have not received a booster and don't have decent masks, should not have to work.

In response to the Omicron outbreak, Metlink and NZ Bus have not introduced any additional measures, such as distancing passengers. Previously, when the country was locked down, buses "only had rear boarding, we didn't have front boarding, and we could tape off the front two seats."

"What the government's put in place is just so weak," the driver said. Large numbers of workers could get sick and "there's lots of dire warnings about us having to go back to work earlier, when we're not fully recovered." This is already happening in Australia, where millions of people have been infected since mid-December.

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