An open letter to workers in New Zealand: Join the fight to stop the pandemic and save lives in 2022!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The working class in New Zealand faces immense dangers as a result of the Labour Party-led government's decision to allow the Omicron variant of COVID-19 to spread throughout the country. The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers, students and young people to take action to prevent a looming catastrophe, and to unite with workers internationally to put an end to the pandemic.

In justifying the decision to reopen the schools on January 31, and to keep all businesses open, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern echoed the claims being made internationally that Omicron is "mild" and "manageable." This is pure propaganda.

Worldwide, the variant continues to kill more than 9,000 people every day. The *Economist* estimates that the pandemic has killed more than 20.6 million people since COVID-19 was detected more than two years ago—a death toll comparable to the First World War.

The vast majority of these lives could have been saved, and the pandemic ended in a matter of months, if governments had adopted scientific policies to stop the spread and eliminate the virus. This is proven by the successful elimination measures, including strict lockdowns, implemented in New Zealand during the first year-and-a-half, and by China's continuing zero COVID policy.

The COVID death toll in New Zealand stood at 26 in the middle of last year, and is now 53. Since May 2020, China has recorded just four fatalities and its total death toll is 4,636. About the same number are dying of COVID in the United States every two or three days.

In October last year, in the middle of an outbreak of the Delta variant, Ardern announced that New Zealand would abandon its elimination policy. Her government proceeded to end a lockdown in Auckland, and has now joined the US, Australia and most other countries by adopting a policy of mass infection.

This decision is driven by the demands of big business that schools must be open and workers remain on the job, so that the extraction of profit from the working class can continue uninterrupted.

Ardern declared bluntly on January 20: "We won't stop Omicron, but we can try and slow it down." In fact, since the outbreak was detected on January 23, daily community case numbers have soared from 20–30 to more than 100, and Omicron has overtaken the Delta variant. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation has projected that New Zealand could see cases peak at 80,000 a day, with a total of more than 400 dead by the middle of the year. Canterbury University COVID-19 modeller Michael Plank has said up to half the population might eventually be infected.

Starting at the end of February, the government plans to begin dismantling the quarantine requirements for people entering the country, which has kept hundreds of Omicron cases out of the community. This will further fuel the outbreak.

In addition to hundreds or thousands of deaths, thousands of people will end up in hospital and many will develop long COVID. This affliction can impact every organ of the body, persist for an unknown period of time, and leave the infected individuals with serious health problems, including brain damage.

There are many warnings that hospitals, already in crisis due to decades of underfunding, will not cope with the flood of cases. While the government used the pandemic to give tens of billions of dollars in subsidies to big business, it has done virtually nothing to strengthen the healthcare system.

Stuff reported on January 15 that, out of eight district health boards surveyed, hospital bed capacity in use was already between 81 and 112 percent, while between 61 and 79 percent of intensive care units were occupied. St John Ambulance has 150 unfilled staff vacancies nationwide, an 11 percent vacancy that is placing immense pressure on ambulance services.

Vaccination rates are low. On February 2, Ardern declared that 94 percent of people over the age of 12 are "fully vaccinated," giving New Zealand "a head start on Omicron." In fact, only about 35 percent of people over the age of 18 (27 percent of the total population) have received a third shot of the Pfizer vaccine, which is necessary to provide significant protection against Omicron. In a somewhat desperate move, the government has just decided to shorten the gap between the second and third shots from four to three months.

In Australia, hundreds of double-vaccinated people are dying from COVID every week. In Denmark, which Ardern has described as one of the models for New Zealand's approach, Omicron infected 272,811 people in the last seven days and killed 135.

Workers in public transport, education, food processing, retail, hospitality, the healthcare system, and other major industries are all highly exposed to the virus. The government has placed the country in a "red" setting under its "COVID-19 Protection Framework." This means that the virus is circulating, and mandates that businesses use mitigation measures such as requiring vaccine passes, masking, and limits on gathering sizes (none of which applies in schools). The framework, also known as the "traffic light" system, excludes lockdowns and other serious measures such as school and business closures to stop the spread of COVID.

Trains and buses are being crammed with people, not physically distanced and wearing low-quality masks. The government has refused to supply the most effective N95 and similar masks for the

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population as a whole.

Thousands of children returning to school have no significant protection against COVID. Fewer than 40 percent of those aged 5 to 11 have received one vaccine dose. Masks are only required for children from Year 4 (7 and 8 year olds) up. Most schools and early childhood education centres (ECEs) have no mitigation measures, such as air purifiers or ventilation. The Ministry of Education is merely advising teachers to open windows and hold classes outdoors.

The government and the media are spreading false claims that schools are not a major risk for infections, and must remain open for the sake of children's "mental health." In fact, schools have played a central role in spreading the virus since the start of the pandemic in New Zealand. Worldwide, COVID has ripped through schools and ECEs, infecting millions of children, who can easily pass on COVID to others. By the middle of 2021, an estimated 1.5 million children had lost a parent or caregiver to the virus.

Children are at risk of severe illness and death. In the US, more than 1,000 children have died from COVID, and over 6,400 have developed Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome-Children (MIS-C), a condition characterised by inflammation of vital organs such as the heart, lungs and brain.

In Europe, Canada and the US, growing numbers of teachers, parents and students are fighting to close schools in order to save lives—in opposition to governments, big business and the trade unions that support the reopening drive. In South Australia, the Australian Education Union recently intervened to cancel a planned strike voted for by two-thirds of teachers.

The New Zealand government would not be able to implement a "let it rip" policy without the complicity of the trade union bureaucracy, which has worked hand-in-glove with the state and big business to keep everything open.

The primary teachers' union NZEI posted on Facebook on January 31: "Happy first day of school our primary school members across the country! Despite the challenges red settings bring, we know you'll be out there providing an amazing, safe, fun and educational experience to our tamariki [children]."

Former Council of Trade Unions secretary Sam Huggard told Radio NZ he was comfortable with schools reopening and New Zealand was "lucky in a sense that we've been able to get through summer and do the best we can to try and prepare for this."

While the unions parrot the government's false claims, there is growing anxiety and opposition among working people to the pro-business response to the pandemic. A One News Kantor poll published last month found Ardern's approval rating has fallen to 35 percent, the lowest since her Labour government was first elected in 2017. Hundreds of parents and teachers have spoken out on social media against the reopening of schools.

These sentiments must be transformed into a political movement of the working class, directed against the government and the entire capitalist political establishment, including Labour and the unions, which supports policies that will lead to mass infection and death. Urgent action must be prepared, including strikes and shutdowns to close non-essential workplaces and schools.

This must be the starting point of a fight for the global elimination of the coronavirus, waged by workers in New Zealand hand-in-hand with their class brothers and sisters around the world.

The following principles must serve as the foundation of such a movement:

• The present policy of "herd immunity"—i.e., allowing COVID-19 to spread throughout the population—must be repudiated. A new strategy directed toward the elimination and eradication of SARS-CoV-2 must be adopted.

• The policies implemented to stop viral transmission must be determined by the needs of public health. The protection of human life and safety must take absolute and unconditional priority over all corporate-financial interests. The costs of fighting the pandemic—including the payment of wages and salaries, compensation to small business owners, full medical coverage for the ill, and payments to bereaved families—must be borne by corporations and a 100 percent tax on the windfall pandemic profits obtained by large investors through the run-up in the stock market.

• The fight against the pandemic must be conducted on a global scale. The pandemic cannot be stopped unless SARS-CoV-2 is eliminated in all countries. New Zealand workers must demand that vaccines be provided in necessary quantities, free of charge, to their class brothers and sisters in the less developed countries.

Labour, the Greens, the opposition National Party, big business and the corporate-controlled media, together with the trade unions and their pseudo-left supporters, will declare that these policies are 1) impossible to implement and 2) incompatible with the existing capitalist system.

The answer to the first objection is that it is impossible to accept the infection of millions of people and the massive loss of life. As for the second objection, the answer is simply this: If capitalism can offer no solution to a crisis that threatens the lives and well-being of the vast majority of the population, then it should be gotten rid of and replaced with a socialist system that prioritises life over profits.

The fight against COVID is, in essence, a struggle against capitalism. The tragedy of the past two years has made the case for the reorganisation of the world economy in the interests of the working class. We urge all workers to circulate this statement, initiate discussion at your workplace, form rank-and-file committees and win support for collective action to stop the spread of the pandemic.

Contact the Socialist Equality Group and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We are eager to discuss with you the situation in your workplace and to assist you in organising the fight to end the pandemic.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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