

Growing concern about New Zealand government allowing Omicron to spread

Tom Peters
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In a speech to parliament yesterday, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern reiterated the Labour Party-Greens government's message that nothing will be done to stop mass infections from the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

After stating that New Zealand's "hospitalisations and deaths have been the lowest in the OECD for the past two years"—the result of an elimination policy, which the government abandoned last October—Ardern declared that the population must now "prepare to encounter COVID-19 in a way that we have not yet to date, and at a scale we are not used to seeing in this country."

Ardern criticised the opposition National Party for calling for the lifting of border quarantine rules in December and behaving as though the pandemic is "over." In the next breath, however, she outlined the government's plan to dismantle the hotel quarantine system, which has kept thousands of COVID cases out of the community.

The purpose of the so-called "COVID-19 Protection Framework" is to keep schools and businesses open, to ensure the uninterrupted extraction of profit from the working class while COVID spreads everywhere. The framework includes vaccine mandates for some workers, and masking requirements in many areas, but excludes nationwide lockdowns.

Ardern trumpeted the fact that 94 percent of people in New Zealand aged over 12 are double-vaccinated. But only 42 percent of 5- to 11-year-olds have received their first dose. Only about one third of people have received a third dose, necessary for protection against Omicron, leaving a majority of the population highly vulnerable.

New Zealand is now regularly reporting more than 200 cases of Omicron per day. There are 2,048 active

infections in the community—a figure that has more than quadrupled in the last two weeks. Case numbers are expected to soar following the end of the summer holidays and reopening of schools last week.

Recent government-commissioned modelling from the research institute Te Pūnaha Matatini says the Omicron outbreak could peak in mid-March, with tens of thousands of cases per day. In what it calls an optimistic scenario, a total of 1.5 million people could be infected, 11,500 hospitalised and 460 could die over a period of three to four months. In a more pessimistic scenario, deaths could reach 1,450.

There are growing signs of opposition to the "let it rip" agenda. A survey of 520 workers by ELMO Software published on Monday found that 64 percent were concerned about being in the workplace as Omicron spreads.

Another poll, by Newshub-Reid Research, found that 44.3 percent did not think the government was prepared for Omicron. Asked whether they would support a lockdown to deal with the virus, 47.9 percent said yes, while 57.8 percent supported keeping the international border closed longer.

Jenny (not her real name), a disability care worker in Auckland, told the WSWS, "I am concerned about the government now changing their strategy and how it might impact on our people." She was not sure if another lockdown could be enforced, but said "in a way it would be better, because part of responsible government is to protect people."

Jenny, who is in her 60s, said, "I feel less able to fight viruses than I used to be when I was younger." She has pre-diabetes, placing her at greater risk from COVID. Jenny also worried what would happen to the people she cares for if workers get the virus. "Disabled people are so vulnerable, in every way. They can't advocate

for themselves,” she said. Her organisation is already understaffed, and workers are often asked to work long hours to fill gaps.

Even though disabled people are at greater risk of severe illness if they get COVID, workers in the sector have not been given the most effective N95 masks, which are in short supply in New Zealand. Jenny also said the people she cares for have not all received a third vaccine dose, although they would in a few days’ time.

Parents are also increasingly concerned. Despite a barrage of false claims by the government, the media and the unions that schools and childcare centres pose a “low risk” for transmission, several have already been hit by outbreaks since they reopened at the start of February. Positive cases have been found in children in Auckland, Hamilton and Havelock North, prompting dozens of schoolchildren and staff to go into isolation.

Hundreds of comments have appeared on the Ministry of Education’s Facebook page in recent days expressing concerns about the lack of physical distancing, poor ventilation, low child vaccination rates and inconsistent masking rules in schools. Only children in Year 4 and over (ages 7 and 8) need to wear masks.

A mother in South Auckland, who has asthma and mitral valve regurgitation (a heart condition), told the WSWs: “There’s a lot of talk from the government about how ‘we need to protect the vulnerable,’ but then there’s no regulation about vulnerable parents having to send their children to school and possibly bring home Omicron. They say it’s for their [children’s] mental health etc. But it won’t be good for their mental health if their vulnerable parent dies.”

She concluded, “It’s not worth risking our lives and our children’s lives for school when we can prevent COVID by reducing contact with others during this time and engaging in remote learning.”

As in other countries, the teacher unions have played a central role in enforcing the pro-business agenda of reopening of schools. Liam Rutherford, president of the primary union, the NZEI, told NewstalkZB on January 31: “Schools are bracing themselves for how you keep your school open when you’ve got a large chunk of your staff or a large chunk of your students all close contacts or with COVID.”

Post-Primary Teachers’ Association president

Melanie Webber told *Newshub* yesterday the pressure on teachers was “not ideal,” but they were “pulling together to do their absolute best to make it work.”

Meanwhile, the corporate media is giving blanket coverage to far-right protests demanding the removal of vaccine mandates. About 1,000 people joined a vehicle “convoy” to Wellington over the past few days, inspired by the so-called “Freedom Convoy” in Canada. Several hundred are camped outside parliament, with signs and slogans denouncing the government’s measures.

Yesterday, former Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, who leads the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, tweeted his support for the convoy, saying it represented “legitimately frustrated kiwis.” In fact, such protests are extremely unpopular, but are being promoted by sections of the ruling class internationally to give the impression of significant opposition to public health restrictions, and to push official politics even further to the right.



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