

COVID-19 surges in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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Today, New Zealand's Ministry of Health reported a record 981 new cases of COVID-19 in the community. This follows 810 cases yesterday, which was nearly double the previous day's tally.

In the space of two weeks, New Zealand's Omicron outbreak has roughly quadrupled in size from a total of 770 active cases on January 31, to more than 4,000 yesterday. The number of people in hospital with the virus has jumped from 14 to 39 in one week.

Until recently, New Zealand was relatively free from COVID-19. In October 2021, however, during an outbreak of the Delta variant, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared that the government would no longer seek to reduce cases to zero using lockdowns and other public health measures.

With the arrival of the highly infectious Omicron variant, the Labour Party-Greens government dropped any pretence of eliminating COVID-19. It is now following the same policy as governments in Europe, America and Australia: schools and businesses must remain open, so that profits are extracted from the working class, while the virus is allowed to spread everywhere, infecting masses of people.

The alarming spike in daily cases is only the beginning. COVID-19 researcher Dion O'Neale told the *New Zealand Herald* the country would likely reach 1,000 confirmed cases a day by the middle of the week. This would quickly overwhelm the country's contact tracing capacity.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told *Stuff* the number of people already infected could be 10 times higher than the official tally, since people without symptoms are not being tested. He said the majority of the country would soon be exposed to the virus.

Cabinet is meeting today to discuss whether to begin Phase 2 of the government's plan, outlined last month, for dealing with Omicron. Phase 2 does not mean the reintroduction of public health restrictions. On the

contrary, it will help the virus spread even faster by reducing the mandatory self-isolation period for positive cases from 14 days to 10 days, and for contacts from 10 days to 7 days. Contact tracing will also be scaled back.

The government has already announced plans to end the requirement for New Zealand citizens returning from overseas to isolate for 10 days in one of several hotels that are serving as managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities.

The reckless decision to reopen schools this month has helped fuel the outbreak. Last Friday, the Ministry of Education reported there were already 98 COVID-19 cases in schools and 19 at early childhood education centres.

More than half of children aged 5 to 11 are unvaccinated, and those under 5 are ineligible, making them particularly susceptible to catching Omicron and spreading it to others.

Among people aged over 12, 95 percent have received at least two doses of the vaccine. But only about one third of the population has received a third dose, which is essential for significant protection from Omicron.

Newshub reported yesterday that the Auckland South Corrections Facility, run by private company Serco, "is a super-spreader," with 34 prisoners testing positive through rapid antigen tests, and two staff also testing positive.

Seven staff and seven patients have also tested positive at two Auckland Hospital geriatric wards. New admissions and discharges from the wards have been halted.

A New Zealand tourist may have spread Omicron to the Cook Islands, a Pacific semi-colony of NZ with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. A passenger on a flight that left the islands last Monday tested positive, and is thought to have been infectious while in the Cook

Islands for eight days.

Karla Eggleton, from the Cook Islands' tourism department, told TVNZ that despite the danger of an outbreak "the border remains open" and "it's business as usual." Only 70 percent of the eligible population is triple-vaccinated, and the small healthcare system will not cope in an outbreak. There are two respirators suitable for COVID patients.

While New Zealand's corporate media is largely focused on anti-vaccination protesters outside parliament, there is growing concern in the working class about the impending explosion of Omicron.

A healthcare worker at Taranaki Base Hospital in New Plymouth told the *World Socialist Web Site* he feared they would be overwhelmed with cases. "We have to give health support to other diseases too, not only COVID. So what is the government's plan? If things go on like this, our hospitals will be out of beds and staff members in the next one or two months."

The hospital, which serves a region with 124,380 people, has 150 beds and, according to official information, only 6 fully-staffed intensive care beds.

A Wellington hotel worker, who asked to be referred to as T, told the WSWS that she was worried about coming into contact with travellers from Auckland, the centre of New Zealand's outbreak, and international travellers. She suffers from asthma, placing her at greater risk of illness if she contracts the virus.

T said the food and beverage team was not well-protected, especially when the restaurant area is crowded. "We're quite close to the customers, we're very interactive because we have to serve them." Customers were "very cautious about COVID-19" but they did not wear masks during meals. Like most workers, the hotel staff were not being given the most effective N95 masks, but only less-effective surgical masks.

There is considerable financial pressure on low-paid workers not to get tested for COVID. As a casual, part-time worker, T said that when she recently had to get a test and isolate for two days, she was not paid by her employer.

John, a student at Victoria University of Wellington, said he was "very concerned about the prospect of getting Omicron. I haven't had my booster yet. There's no guarantee I won't get Long COVID, or even worse, and there're older members of the family who are more

at risk. So I'm really concerned at the prospect of widespread community transmission."

Last year there were mask mandates on campus but "loads of people weren't wearing them, or were wearing them inadequately," John said. He said he would face "huge risks of exposure" travelling by train and going into crowded lecture theatres.

John commented that he "was hoping last year, that there would be protests saying: 'don't abandon elimination.' But there was nothing, there was no coordinated resistance."

As is the case internationally, the New Zealand trade unions, acting in the interests of the affluent middle class and big business, have suppressed opposition to the government's policy of mass infection. They have collaborated in herding people back to unsafe workplaces and schools.

The working class faces immense dangers while there is no organised movement, based on socialist principles, fighting for a properly funded elimination strategy to save lives and put an end to the pandemic.

The Socialist Equality Group has issued a statement calling on workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, in opposition to the Ardern government and the unions, in order to fight for the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, and other crucial public health policies. We call on workers and young people to contact us and discuss this perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact