

New Zealand rail workers highlight unsafe conditions as COVID-19 surge continues

Tom Peters**17 February 2022**

New Zealand's Omicron outbreak continues to surge. Today, 1,929 new cases were reported in the community, up from 1,573 yesterday, bringing official active infections to 9,874.

The real numbers are undoubtedly far higher, since few people without symptoms are being tested. Most cases are in Auckland, but there are outbreaks across the North Island, as well as in Christchurch, Invercargill and Nelson in the South Island.

The highly infectious Omicron outbreak is expanding in line with modellers' scenarios. If the current trend continues, epidemiologist Michael Baker told the *New Zealand Herald*, "we could be hitting 10,000 cases a day by early March."

There are currently 73 people in hospital with the virus. New Zealand's death toll still stands at 53, which is much lower than other countries, because of the elimination strategy adopted early in the pandemic. The Labour Party-led government, at the behest of big business, abandoned this strategy last October and declared an end to lockdowns.

Deaths will undoubtedly increase in coming weeks, as has happened in Australia and everywhere else where governments have allowed Omicron to spread out of control. Just over 40 percent of the population has received a third booster dose of the Pfizer vaccine, which is essential to provide any protection from Omicron.

At Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland, one in ten patients admitted to the emergency department in recent days tested positive for the virus. Dr Vanessa Thornton, the department head, told Radio NZ this morning: "It's challenging. We already had reduced staffing... prior to this. And with the illness affecting the community, it obviously affects our workforce as well." She added that "we may have to reduce some

other services in order to cope" with the Omicron surge.

Despite claims by the government, media and unions that schools present a "low risk" of transmission, as of yesterday there were 320 schools and early childcare centres with COVID cases.

The New Zealand media continues to focus on a protest outside parliament, now in its 11th day, opposing vaccine mandates and other public health measures. Right-wing politicians, and some pseudo-left commentators, falsely claim that the occupation, organised by far-right groups, represents the views of ordinary people—and even the "working class."

In fact, more than 95 percent of the eligible population is double-vaccinated and there is growing concern about the spread of Omicron. A Change.org petition titled "Tell the Wellington Protestors to Go Home - They are NOT the majority" is rapidly gaining support, with more than 31,000 signatures so far.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers on Wellington's commuter rail network, employed by private company Transdev, who expressed opposition to the protest at parliament, which is across the road from the city's railway station.

"The longer it continues, the longer it is seen as a threat to the health and safety of workers, especially since a lot of these right-wing mobsters take the train to and from the protest," said one worker, who asked to remain anonymous.

Another worker, Todd (not his real name), felt that "it's only a matter of time" before COVID spreads throughout the train network. "It's an appalling situation to have to go to a job for a company that doesn't give a damn about you, so long as you get the job done," he said.

A worker, who we will call Jack, said some

passengers were refusing to use masks, in defiance of the rules. “I don’t think any staff should have to police that: it’s not their job. I don’t think the council, or Transdev have done as much as they could have done to protect workers,” he said.

More generally, Jack said onboard staff needed better safety gear, including gloves, because they have to handle cash from passengers. He described the current physical distancing guidelines as “a bit of a joke, really. They say you’ve got to have at least a metre between you, yet the train managers and clippies have to actually take the money from a person, and you’ve also got to walk through them if it’s a busy train.”

Workers are not given N95 masks, only the much less effective surgical masks.

Another concern is that if workers get COVID and have to isolate for weeks, they will use up their sick leave and possibly some annual leave. Otherwise, they will be forced to take unpaid leave and rely on meagre government support payments, which means a pay cut of about half.

Todd said the company was “trying to take the cheapest option” by not offering special COVID leave. He said this could discourage people from getting tested if they have symptoms.

Jack said workers who have commented on Transdev’s online chat application about safety issues have had their comments deleted by management. “Anything negative towards the company is just gotten rid of, so that nobody else can read it,” he said. People were “feeling worried and scared, and they’re not being listened to.”

He added that “we’ve heard absolutely nothing” from the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) regarding safety standards during the Omicron surge. “When you’re paying them money, you would think that the union would be talking to” workers about their concerns, “rather than sitting somewhere and not taking any notice whatsoever.”

Todd said the RMTU was too focused on “keeping the government happy and their own personal agendas, which are not always helpful to the people they’re representing. It’s irritating that we can be controlled like that, without any influence.”

The unions in every industry are enforcing the government’s “let it rip” policy. Acting as the agents of big business, they have enforced the dangerous

reopening of schools and non-essential businesses.

Workers, however, are seeking a way to fight back against both the soaring cost of living and dangerous working conditions. This week, 10,000 healthcare workers from several different occupations—including laboratory workers who process COVID-19 tests, and contact tracers—voted to strike for two days, on March 4 and 18.

They rejected an offer from the government’s District Health Boards that failed to address low pay and chronic understaffing, which has left many overworked and burnt out. The Public Service Association, however, has not made any demands public, merely calling on the government to make a “fair” offer. Behind the scenes, the union and government are undoubtedly attempting to reach a sellout deal and call off the strike.

Workers must break the stranglehold of the corporatist unions in order to unite across the healthcare sector and with workers in education, public transport, and elsewhere, both in New Zealand and internationally. The Socialist Equality Group calls for the building of a network of rank-and-file safety committees, controlled by workers themselves, in all schools, hospitals and other workplaces, to fight for a properly-funded strategy to eliminate COVID-19 and save lives.



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