

COVID surge accelerates in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's COVID-19 surge continues, with case numbers rising sharply every day, placing immense pressure on the rundown healthcare system. Daily reported infections have nearly tripled in the past week, from 1,160 on February 16 to 3,297 today.

The total number of active cases in the community is at least 21,648. There are 179 people with COVID in hospital. Three deaths have been recorded so far this week, bringing the total for the pandemic to 56.

The Labour Party-led government repeatedly refers to the fact that deaths are among the lowest in the world. However, the government abandoned the elimination strategy which kept COVID out of the country for most of the past two years in October. Since then, businesses and schools have been reopened, allowing the Delta and Omicron variants to spread.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told a press conference on Monday that “very soon we will all know people who have COVID, or we will potentially get it ourselves.” She declared that “most people” who get sick will only have a “mild-to-moderate illness.”

In fact, while governments are rolling back public health restrictions and pretending the pandemic is over, worldwide about 60,000-70,000 people are dying from the virus every week.

Epidemiologist Rod Jackson told Radio NZ today he is concerned people are not taking Omicron seriously enough. He said it was “just not true” to call it a mild disease, and pointed out that in the US “more people have died from Omicron than died from Delta”—a fact that has not been widely reported.

Vaccination, while essential, is not enough to prevent significant levels of illness and death. Some 49.6 percent of COVID patients in Auckland and Northland hospitals are described as fully vaccinated.

In just the last seven days, Ireland recorded 70 COVID deaths, Singapore 46, and Denmark 232. These countries have a relatively high level of vaccination and

a population similar to New Zealand.

Hundreds of NZ schools are being hit with outbreaks, despite false assurances from the government that reopening schools, with children largely unvaccinated, was safe. Yesterday, the Ministry of Education reported that at least 447 schools and early childhood education centres were managing COVID cases, up from 163 a week earlier.

Otago University and Auckland University have chosen to move courses online for the first two months of the academic year. Canterbury University and Victoria University of Wellington, however, are pushing ahead with in-person lectures.

Public hospitals, which have been starved of funds for decades, are already under tremendous pressure. All the problems that existed before COVID, including chronic understaffing and overcrowded emergency departments, have been exacerbated.

Dianne McCulloch, a nurse from Waitakere Hospital's emergency department and a New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) delegate, told Radio NZ last night, “We are on the brink of total exhaustion.” The situation is “worsening daily,” and “we are in fear that we are not going to cope,” she said.

Yesterday, Auckland Hospital and Greenlane Hospital announced that large numbers of non-urgent surgeries would be cancelled, in order to free up resources for COVID patients.

About 10,000 allied health workers have voted to strike for two days next month, over low pay and poor conditions. The Public Service Association (PSA) members include laboratory workers who process COVID tests, and contact tracers. Due to a lack of resources, some tests are taking five days to process.

All the unions, however, including the NZNO and PSA, have enforced the Labour government's pro-business decision to abandon elimination. None of them have called for schools and non-essential

businesses to close in order to stamp out COVID, which is the only way to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed, and to save lives.

While the unions are seeking to prevent the emergence of a working class movement fighting for a scientific and properly-resourced elimination policy, the political establishment and the media are promoting extreme right wing proponents of mass infection.

For more than two weeks, the media has focused on several hundred anti-vaccination protesters occupying the lawn outside parliament in Wellington. The protesters, following the example of the Canadian “Freedom Convoy,” have blocked streets, forcing the closure of businesses, the National Library, university buildings, and Wellington Girls College. Several of the school’s students have reportedly been harassed by the protesters.

There have been violent confrontations with police. Human faeces was reportedly flung at the cops on Monday. Yesterday, three officers were injured after protesters sprayed them with what is thought to have been acid. Three people were arrested, including one who tried to drive a car into police officers.

The protest has spread beyond Wellington. About 1,000 people, led by Destiny Church’s front group, the Freedom and Rights Coalition, marched through Christchurch on Saturday, demanding the removal of vaccine mandates and an end to the inoculation of children. A smaller encampment has been established in Picton.

The rally promoters include anti-vax conspiracy theorists, far-right bloggers, the New Conservative Party, Destiny Church, and Counterspin, a NZ-based online media platform funded by US fascist Steve Bannon.

This rabble has received non-stop media coverage and encouragement from capitalist politicians, as well as some liberal and self-styled “left” commentators. A number of well-heeled celebrities have also voiced support, including Olympic sailor Russell Coutts, former All Black Keith Robinson, TV personality Gilda Kirkpatrick and musician Jason Kerrison.

Opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon declared on Monday: “Kiwis should be able to sympathise with some of the issues being raised by protesters on parliament’s grounds without being framed as condoning illegal behaviour, or siding with

anti-science conspiracy theorists.” He demanded that the government say when it will “start reducing the rules and restrictions” and “phasing out the mandates.”

National’s ally, the right-wing ACT Party leader David Seymour, has held discussions with protest representatives. Right-wing nationalist NZ First Party leader Winston Peters yesterday visited the encampment without wearing a mask. Peters was deputy prime minister from 2017 to 2020, when NZ First was a key partner in the previous Labour-led coalition government.

Peters told Newstalk ZB that the protesters were “very concerned” about “the state of democracy.” He denounced Ardern and other politicians for refusing to talk to the protesters, and said darkly that “because of that sort of arrogant behaviour, things are going to get a whole lot worse.”

The government is, in fact, moving to remove remaining restrictions, starting with the border quarantine system. From the end of February, New Zealanders returning from Australia will no longer have to isolate themselves in a quarantine hotel for 10 days. On Monday, Ardern told the media that COVID-19 cases were expected to peak in mid-to-late March, after which the government would start easing mandates and vaccine pass requirements.



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