More than 120,000 COVID cases in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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The number of active COVID-19 cases in New Zealand has passed 120,000. The size of the Omicron variant outbreak has expanded more than a hundredfold in the past month.

There were 22,152 new infections reported today, following 19,566 yesterday. There are 405 people in hospital. The death toll rose to 61 last Friday, with five deaths recorded in a single day, the largest daily number in New Zealand during the pandemic. This is only the beginning.

COVID-19 Minister Chris Hipkins said today that the number of people in hospital with the virus could reach 1,000 or 1,500. This would be "challenging" for health workers, he stated.

The positivity rate is very high, with about one in five people in Wellington, the capital city, testing positive, indicating there are many undetected cases. Less than 60 percent of people over 12 have received a third dose of the Pfizer vaccine, and just over half of those aged 5 to 11 have received a single dose, leaving many without significant protection against Omicron.

The explosion of cases was not inevitable. It is the outcome of the Labour Party-led government's decision in October last year to abandon its previous elimination policy. Since then, public health restrictions have been progressively lifted and the government has declared there will be no return to lockdowns.

The government talks about Omicron washing over New Zealand in a wave, which will supposedly peak and then subside, causing minimal harm. In fact, as the entire pandemic has shown, allowing the virus to spread means there will be continuous waves. The virus can infect people multiple times, and mutate into new variants, continuing to cause large numbers of deaths, severe illness and disability. The only way to protect lives and people's health is through a properly funded elimination strategy.

Laboratories processing COVID tests have been overwhelmed with demand. Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield yesterday apologised for a delay in processing a backlog of 32,000 tests. Some people are waiting longer than five days for a result. In response to the crisis, the government sent over 9,000 tests to Queensland, Australia for processing over the weekend.

Elspeth Frascatore, an emergency doctor in Auckland, wrote on the *Spinoff*website that healthcare workers feel "overwhelmed" and "unseen" as politicians agitate for the removal of all public health restrictions. "COVID is not finished with us. It's just getting started," she warned.

As hospitalisations soar, Radio NZ reported yesterday that about 880 workers at the Counties Manukau District Health Board in working class South Auckland, 13.5 percent of all hospital staff, are off sick or isolating because a member of their household has the virus. Across Auckland, hospitals have drastically cut back on services and non-urgent procedures are being postponed.

Thousands of workers herded into unsafe workplaces are being exposed to the virus, which is disrupting supply chains. The Countdown supermarket chain reports that nearly 1,000 workers around the country are infected, including 45 percent of staff at two Auckland distribution centres.

New Zealand Couriers, a major delivery company, told the media today that half of its workforce in Auckland is not able to work, and the company has been forced to cut back to delivering only medical supplies and other essentials.

COVID continues to spread like wildfire among younger people due to the criminal resumption of in-person learning. Minister Hipkins declared last Friday

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that one in five schools had cases and the government expects "just about every school, every early childhood service" will come into contact with the virus in a matter of weeks.

The Ministry announced last week that schools no longer had to contact trace or inform parents that their child may be a close contact. The government is relying on the teacher unions, which support keeping schools open, regardless of how many people get sick, so that parents can remain on the job, making profits for big business.

Some schools, however, are taking their own action. Last week, Henderson Intermediate closed for two weeks after having COVID cases in almost every class. Its principal Wendy Esera said to the *New Zealand Herald*: "We're hearing all the time that everybody's going to get it ... well actually our attitude at our school is no, we're not. We are going to do everything we can to keep our staff and our students and their families safe."

Universities are being swamped with cases. Dr Bloomfield described the start of the university year as "a nationwide super-spreader event." Some universities have moved to online learning.

At Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), where in-person learning began this week, 850 students in halls of residence—about 30 percent—have tested positive for COVID. The Tertiary Education Union's branch secretary Dougal McNeil, a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, yesterday criticised VUW for not properly informing staff about the COVID situation, so that they could make individual decisions about whether to shift to online learning. The TEU, however, supported the government's wholesale reopening of education institutions.

The ongoing anti-vaccination encampment outside parliament in Wellington is another super-spreader. As of Monday, 17 COVID cases were linked to the protest, including 3 that had to be hospitalised. The right-wing, religious and anti-science groups leading the protest have denounced vaccine mandates and other public health measures as "tyranny," and demanded that the population "live with" the virus.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern denounced the three-week occupation as a "COVID camp" and urged people to stay away for health reasons. Her government, however, backed by the pro-capitalist unions, has acceded to demands from the opposition parties and business interests for restrictions to be lifted more rapidly.

Last Friday the government moved to "phase three" of its Omicron response plan. This means a shift to greater "personal responsibility" and looser restrictions. Only COVID cases and household contacts are required to isolate; other contacts of positive cases, such as work colleagues, do not need to. People can increasingly test themselves using rapid antigen tests (RATs) and are asked to log their positive results online, and to "self-notify their contacts."

In addition, Ardern announced that, from Friday this week, vaccinated New Zealanders entering the country from any part of the world will no longer be required to self-isolate for any period, provided they test negative for COVID.

All these changes will further accelerate the spread of the virus.

While the unions have suppressed opposition to the "let it rip" agenda, the crisis is pushing workers to fight back against unsafe conditions and low wages. Ten thousand healthcare workers, including laboratory workers processing COVID tests, voted to strike for 24 hours this Friday, and again on March 18.

Yesterday, the country's District Health Boards asked the Employment Court to impose an injunction to stop Friday's strike, ahead of negotiations with the Public Service Association scheduled to take place next week, facilitated by the Employment Relations Authority. The court has not yet made its decision.

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