

Oppose the New Zealand government's criminal policy of mass infection. The working class must fight to eliminate COVID-19!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)

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In recent weeks, the highly infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 has surged across New Zealand and is now completely out of control, placing tremendous pressure on the already overstretched and underfunded public health system.

There are now more than 20,000 daily cases, up from around 200 in early February. More than 200,000 people have the virus, in a country of five million. The Labour Party-Greens coalition government admits that the real infection rate could be five times as high.

The explosive outbreak has undoubtedly shocked working people and public health experts internationally who previously saw New Zealand as a model for dealing with the coronavirus. For most of the pandemic, the country had one of the lowest rates of infection. Until October 2021, it had recorded fewer than 4,300 cases, and just 27 COVID-related deaths.

Two years ago, the government implemented a relatively strict lockdown, which eliminated COVID-19. It did so out of fear of a developing mass movement among tens of thousands of workers, who were demanding a lockdown. The lockdowns were initially opposed by the teachers' and nurses' unions. Subsequent outbreaks were also stamped out, and a border quarantine system was introduced, saving thousands of lives and allowing daily life to proceed with few restrictions for most of 2020 and 2021.

Internationally, governments imposed partial lockdowns and other public health restrictions only with extreme reluctance and to prevent strikes and walkouts by the working class. These measures, which were never sufficient to stop the pandemic, were viewed by big business as an unacceptable imposition on the "right" to make profits. All governments, with the exception of China, adopted the policy of prioritising profit and production over life. The official underestimated figure of more than six million dead was the result of the conscious decisions of capitalist governments.

According to the *Economist*'s modelling, the pandemic has killed about 20 million people worldwide. While governments increasingly act as though the pandemic is over, and the media has largely dropped COVID from the top stories—replaced by warmongering against Russia over Ukraine—Omicron continues to kill about 50,000 people per week. There are fears that the more dangerous BA.2 Omicron variant is causing a new global surge.

The pandemic's horrific death toll, comparable to that of World War I, was entirely preventable; it is the outcome of political decisions that have prioritised profits and production over the lives of working people.

In October last year, the New Zealand government succumbed to

intense pressure from big business and from other countries, to ditch its elimination policy. This included the intervention in September of former Prime Minister and banker John Key, who lambasted the government for creating a "smug hermit kingdom" comparable to "North Korea."

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the "transition" away from elimination in the middle of a Delta outbreak on the basis that it was no longer possible to contain outbreaks. The decision to scrap restrictions came two days after an anti-lockdown rally in Auckland, led by the far-right Destiny Church.

New Zealand joined Australia, Singapore and other Asia-Pacific countries which lifted restrictions around the same time. Politicians and the media adopted the mantra that COVID-19 would become "endemic," and people must accept the deadly virus permanently circulating in the community.

In response to Omicron, which entered New Zealand in January, Ardern promised there would be no lockdowns, and schools and businesses will remain open.

New Zealand's rate of infection is now one of the highest in the world. According to the *Financial Times*' COVID tracker, on March 6, New Zealand had 433.2 confirmed cases per 100,000 people, which is higher than the official rates in the United States, Britain and Australia during the height of the Omicron wave in those countries in January.

This crisis threatens to bring a tidal wave of severe illness and deaths. The number of COVID-related deaths has nearly doubled since the start of the year to 113 (as of yesterday). The government has admitted recently that the death toll was being under reported and has now been revised upwards. While this is still low by world standards, experts have warned that it is only the beginning, as deaths lag behind hospitalisations. There are nearly 900 hospital patients with COVID, up from just 14 on February 8.

Omicron has ripped through schools, exposing the government lies, repeated by the trade unions, that they posed a low risk of transmission. On Friday, *Newshub* reported that 75 percent of schools have had cases of the virus.

The grossly underfunded hospital system is already overwhelmed, and services have been cut back to cope with the influx of COVID patients. Hundreds of staff have been infected.

In response to the vertical rise in cases, the government has lifted more restrictions, helping the virus spread even faster. It has slashed the mandatory isolation period for positive cases and household contacts from 10 days to 7 and is dismantling the border quarantine

system.

In a dangerous and criminal move, the Ministry of Health announced last week that healthcare workers in COVID wards can be asked to continue working while infected with the virus.

The Ardern government claims that the availability of vaccines means society can “live with” the virus, and that the Omicron wave will subside once large numbers of people are infected. These are bare-faced lies.

Firstly, just half of New Zealanders have received a third dose of the Pfizer vaccine, which is essential to reduce the risk of infection and severe disease from Omicron. Secondly, the experience of country after country proves that vaccination alone cannot stop the virus from spreading, causing significant levels of illness and death, and mutating into more infectious and deadlier variants.

Ardern falsely declared in January that it was “nigh on impossible” to stop Omicron. In fact, China, a country of more than a billion people, is successfully maintaining a zero COVID policy. Millions of lives have been saved through the use of isolation, quarantine, mass testing, and rapid lockdowns where cases are detected. If all countries took the same approach, coordinated internationally, the pandemic would be over in a few months.

New Zealand’s elimination policy was popular in the working class and contributed to Labour’s re-election in 2020. The decision to ditch the policy was made behind the backs of the population, in a completely anti-democratic manner, and against the advice of public health experts.

There was no organised opposition to the government’s about-face, above all because the trade unions collaborated with the state and big business to enforce the new policy. Like their counterparts internationally, the unions herded people back into unsafe schools, universities and workplaces.

The unions do not represent the working class; these organisations speak for a privileged layer of the upper middle class, close to the Labour Party, who oppose any measures that could seriously impact corporate profits and the share market.

In addition to the perfidy of the unions, workers seeking to fight back against unsafe conditions and the soaring cost of living are confronted by the anti-democratic powers of the state. In an action without precedent in recent decades, the Employment Court on March 3 banned a one-day strike by 10,000 healthcare workers. The Public Service Association had already sought to undermine the strike by cancelling it for Auckland, the largest city.

In stark contrast with this attack on workers who have borne the brunt of the pandemic, the political establishment has embraced the extreme right. An anti-vaccination protest involving several right-wing groups was allowed to occupy the lawn outside parliament and surrounding streets, for three weeks. Its demands for an end to vaccine mandates were amplified by the media and the opposition National Party, ACT, the Maori Party and the right-wing nationalist NZ First.

While Ardern fulminated against the protest, her government is implementing the far-right’s program for COVID to be allowed to spread.

The pseudo-left groups and publications—the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), the *Daily Blog*, Organise Aotearoa (OA) and Socialist Aotearoa (SA)—are all, in one way or another, aligned with the government. They either remain silent about the policy of mass infection (like SA and OA), politely suggest that Labour should do more to protect people (like the ISO), or praise Ardern’s “courageous leadership” (*Daily Blog*).

All these middle-class tendencies seek to subordinate workers to the trade unions, with which they have close ties, and through them to the Labour government itself.

The Socialist Equality Group alone calls on the working class to intervene with its own, independent political program, to stop this rapidly worsening crisis. Workers and young people cannot accept the ruling class’s agenda of unending sickness and deaths from a virus that can be controlled and stamped out.

The fight against COVID is a political struggle, not simply a medical one. It can only succeed to the extent that it is guided by a socialist perspective to abolish capitalism throughout the world. Capitalist governments have proven that there is no limit to the number of deaths they will accept in the interests of profit.

To fight for a properly-funded elimination strategy, the SEG calls on workers to form new organisations: rank-and-file safety committees, controlled by workers, should be built in every school, university, hospital and every other workplace. These have to be independent of the corporatist trade unions, Labour, their pseudo-left hangers on and every capitalist party.

The task of these committees must be to unite the working class in New Zealand, as well as internationally, against the agenda of mass infection. Ending the pandemic requires a globally coordinated campaign, utilising the most advanced scientific knowledge and resources.

Specific demands will include the temporary closure of schools, universities and nonessential businesses, combined with mass testing of the population, and a stepped-up vaccination campaign.

Workers and small business owners must be fully paid during the lockdown, and students supported to undertake remote learning.

Workers in essential industries including healthcare, public transport, food production and distribution, must be given appropriate PPE, including N95 masks, and be triple vaccinated. Strict physical distancing must be enforced. The necessary employment to allow these measures must be undertaken.

The managed isolation and quarantine system at the border must be reinstated and expanded to provide decent and safe accommodation for everyone entering the country.

Workers must reject the lie that these measures are too expensive. An elimination strategy can be paid for by redirecting the tens of billions of dollars that Labour has given to the banks and corporations over the past two years to bail them out and prop up their profits.

The billions wasted on the armed forces and intelligence agencies to prepare for war must also be redirected towards the war against COVID-19.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers and young people to share this statement widely with workmates and friends, and to contact us to discuss these urgent issues.



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