

Nearly 1,000 people in hospital with COVID in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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The Omicron outbreak in New Zealand continues to expand dramatically, leading to increased deaths and hospitalisations, and growing anger among working people.

The number of people in hospital with COVID reached 971 today. There are about 20,000 cases being reported per day and roughly 200,000 known active cases, but experts say the real figure is likely far higher.

The death toll has more than doubled since the start of the year to 141. This is still low by world standards because for most of the past two years there was practically no COVID-19 in New Zealand.

The Labour Party-led government abandoned its zero COVID policy in October 2021. Since then it has removed more restrictions, promising to avoid lockdowns and keep schools and businesses open. The government has embraced a policy of mass infection that has unleashed a preventable disaster.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told *Stuff* that deaths could soon reach 10 to 20 per day. So far, the record for New Zealand is eight deaths in a single day.

The much more contagious BA.2 subvariant of Omicron is now dominant in New Zealand. BA.2 is fuelling a surge internationally, including rising hospitalisations in the UK and record deaths among children in the US. COVID-19 has killed more than 20 million people globally and continues to kill about 50,000 a week.

On March 10, the NZ Ministry of Health revealed that it had previously been undercounting COVID deaths due to overly restricted reporting criteria. Following a “reconciliation” of figures, nine deaths not previously recorded were added to the toll. Now, the government is reporting all deaths that occur within 28 days of contracting the virus as COVID-related deaths—the same approach used in the UK and many

other countries.

The healthcare system is breaking down under high volumes of COVID cases and staff absences due to infection. On Monday, Christchurch Hospital and others in the Canterbury district announced the postponement of almost all non-urgent procedures. Nearly 500 healthcare workers were self-isolating due to COVID.

On Tuesday, it was reported that 15 percent of staff at Wellington Hospital were unable to work. In Auckland, the biggest city, hospitals have reported similar absences, and operations have also been cut back.

In response to the crisis, the Ministry of Health last week announced a criminally reckless decision to allow hospitals to ask workers to return to COVID wards while they still have the virus.

A worker at Taranaki Base Hospital, in the central North Island, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the decision was “pure discrimination” against healthcare workers and “a violation of human rights.” He said the government had had “two long years to make sufficient preparations for a COVID-19 outbreak; they did nothing.”

He pointed out that the government had made the hospital staffing crisis worse by failing to recruit enough qualified workers from overseas. Hundreds have been refused entry to New Zealand and others already in the country face needless bureaucratic obstacles to having their qualifications recognised and becoming registered.

The government has also slashed the isolation period for people with the virus, and household contacts, from 10 to 7 days. This will force more people back to work before they have fully recovered.

This week, the government finally declared that three doses of the Pfizer vaccine are required for someone to

be considered fully vaccinated. Only just over 2.5 million people are triple-vaccinated, about half the population.

When the outbreak began, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern encouraged complacency by boasting that New Zealand was in a strong position to withstand Omicron because almost 95 percent of the population aged over 12 was double vaccinated. It was already well known at the end of last year that three doses were needed to provide significant protection.

Schools are a major source of infection. On Monday the Ministry of Education announced 42,261 cases in schools over the previous 10 days. Many children are unvaccinated, and younger children are not required to wear masks. The teacher unions, which enforced the reopening of schools, bear responsibility for this crisis.

In the latest move to normalise the pandemic, Ardern announced today that the border will reopen for visitors from Australia on April 13, with no self-isolation requirements. It will reopen to several other countries on May 2.

Despite the government's push to reopen everything, New Zealand's city centres are largely deserted, with thousands of people either isolating due to COVID-19, or working from home to avoid infection.

The COVID crisis and the soaring cost of living are fuelling growing anger towards the government. In a TVNZ/Kantar poll released last week, the Labour Party dropped to second place for the first time in the pandemic, with just 37 percent support compared to the opposition National Party's 39 percent.

A parent in Auckland told the WSWs "the way [the pandemic] is being handled now is just insanity." People were "being told that schools are safe from COVID when they are not," and that they can return to work even if they test positive. She denounced the Ministry of Health for repeatedly stating that Omicron is "mild" for "most people."

Public transport workers in Wellington are concerned about the rapid spread of the virus, which has infected hundreds of bus and train workers in the city in recent weeks.

A train worker, employed by Transdev, told the WSWs: "When COVID first arrived, we felt that they were making an effort to look after us, but that's much less so now. They think having the vaccine's going to fix everything, but it won't."

The company only recently told workers that they should get a third shot. There is no physical distancing of passengers on trains, and staff are not able to enforce masking requirements.

Drivers for NZ Bus in Wellington are not being informed about the exact numbers of people in the company who are catching COVID. One driver said NZ Bus "won't supply RAT [rapid antigen tests] as it costs them money," yet the company had spent thousands of dollars on installing dozens of surveillance cameras.

Another bus driver said they are not required to wear masks inside the depot, despite it being a poorly ventilated area frequented by many workers. Management says they are "just following government advice; they do the bare minimum, they don't seem to be concerned that half their workforce could come down" with the virus, she said.

The driver agreed that a lockdown "would be a good idea: that would protect us, instead of sacrificing us." She added: "All those people making the decisions aren't on the front lines, are they?"

In a statement published on Monday, the Socialist Equality Group called for workers to form rank-and-file safety committees to fight for a properly-funded elimination strategy. This must be done in opposition to all the trade unions, which agree with and are enforcing the "let it rip" agenda.



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