

New Zealand government ends COVID-19 restrictions amid escalating death toll

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As New Zealand's COVID-19 infections, hospitalisations and deaths continue to mount, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on Wednesday announced the removal of most remaining public health restrictions.

The announcement came in the same week that New Zealand passed the grim milestone of 200 COVID-related deaths. Today, the toll increased by 20, to 254. Total deaths from the virus have more than doubled in the past fortnight. The deaths are not limited to elderly people. On Monday, a person aged in their 20s died of COVID, and on Friday someone aged in their 30s perished.

There are 841 people in hospital with the virus, and more than 118,000 known cases in the community. The real number, however, is likely much higher.

Until October, when the Labour-Green Party government ditched its successful elimination policy, there had been only 32 deaths in a population of 5 million. Ardern repeated all the false claims used by governments overseas that vaccination meant there was no need for public health restrictions, and that the Omicron variant is "mild."

New Zealand is now being brought fully into line with capitalist governments internationally and their criminal "live with the virus" program. The Ardern government is implementing the agenda of big business and of the far-right protesters who recently occupied parliament grounds for three weeks demanding an end to all restrictions.

From this weekend, all outdoor gathering limits have been axed, opening up major sports events and concerts. Limits for indoor gatherings have been increased from 100 people to 200, with only some rules on distancing retained. Outdoor face mask requirements have been removed. Scanning of QR codes has ended.

On April 5, all vaccine mandates will be abolished,

except for workers in the health sector, aged care facilities, prison staff and border and managed isolation workers. Previously about 40 percent of the workforce was subject to some form of mandate. Education, police and the Defence Force will no longer need to mandate their workforces.

Mandates in the health sector will be reviewed and vaccination requirements may be narrowed to a smaller part of the workforce. Already, nurses who are COVID-positive can be called on to return to work in some circumstances. Hospitals in major centres are reporting that 10 to 15 percent of staff are currently unable to work due to the virus.

A few measures are still in place: for the general population, the self-isolation period remains at just seven days for people with COVID-19 and their family contacts. Face masks are still, in theory, required for most indoor settings. Ardern told the media that the restrictions will be further eased "as soon as possible."

The government had already announced in February a phased reopening of borders to quarantine-free international travel, initially for NZ citizens and then for visitors and tourists. A decision earlier this month, under intense pressure from the tourism industry to accelerate the process, allows tourists from Australia to enter in time for Easter and the school holidays.

Scientific experts, who are often reluctant to strongly criticise the government, expressed considerable opposition to the latest changes. Prior to Ardern's announcement, a group of public health specialists called on the government to "pump the brakes" on loosening COVID-19 restrictions.

Writing on the Otago University Public Health Expert blog, epidemiologist Michael Baker and his colleagues warned that not only will the virus keep mutating, but immune protection wanes over time. The result will be

“thousands of cases a day for the rest of the year,” with at least 200 or 300 people in hospital all the time, placing a huge strain on the health system.

Auckland University epidemiologist Rod Jackson told Radio NZ that the worst may be yet to come/ The “clamour to ditch vaccine passes and change the traffic light setting is poorly timed,” he stated. Jackson added: “It makes absolutely no sense to remove any effective public health measures when we’re still at the top [of infections]. It’s crazy. I think it’s political nonsense to be pushing to take them away now.”

Government spokespeople dismissed the concerns. COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins told TV 1 that vaccine mandates have “served their purpose.” He denied the government was “letting down our guard,” pointing to what he called “very high rates of vaccination across the country.” In fact, only two thirds of the eligible population has had the booster shot necessary for meaningful protection against Omicron, leaving millions of people particularly exposed.

A key government advisor, epidemiologist David Skegg, made it clear that Ardern has been guided by the interests of business. Skegg, chair of the COVID-19 Public Health Advisory Group, told Radio NZ that the pandemic has not gone away but the government has to balance between “keeping everyone safe” and the “social and economic costs” of ongoing restrictions.

The drive to prioritise “the economy” over public health is the product of an increasingly raucous campaign by business and the media to establish a “new normal” and place the pursuit of profits ahead of all other considerations.

Right-wing radio host Kate Hawkesby recently declared it is time to “drop the scaremongering epidemiologists.” Taking aim at Jackson, she continued: “Only [!!] half a million of us have even caught Covid. Yet he still wants the ‘team of 5 million’ to remain punished, fear-ridden, and holed up like hermits.” The term “hermit kingdom,” a slur previously directed against North Korea, was applied to New Zealand several months ago by former National Party prime minister and banker John Key to deride strict border measures.

The opposition National and ACT parties have both been pushing the government to go harder with loosening COVID restrictions. National wants to drop all scanning requirements for businesses and to scrap

vaccine passes for all but large indoor events. The party also wants to get rid of all vaccine mandates for young people aged under 18, and to move to five-day isolation periods.

However, there is concern and alarm among broad layers of the population. Some of the country’s most at-risk people say the government is trading off their safety by easing restrictions so soon.

One unnamed mother told the *New Zealand Herald* that trying to keep her immunocompromised husband and toddlers protected was “hard enough,” but the announcement had pulled the rug from underneath them. “We felt safe before, and now we don’t feel safe. We’ve done everything right, but this drop in the rules, the stance and the whole attitude change from the government is really quite gutting,” she said.

The trade unions are playing the central role in promoting the government’s policies, having suppressed opposition from the working class to the reopening of schools and non-essential businesses. Post-Primary Teachers’ Association president Melanie Webber welcomed the decision to remove vaccine mandates, falsely stating that it had been “based on the best public health advice.” She said unvaccinated teachers would now be able to return to work, despite the risk they pose to themselves and others.

According to Ministry of Education data, over 70 percent of schools nationwide have reported COVID-19 cases since schools were re-opened in February. In the 10 days leading into March 24, more than 64,000 cases were recorded in schools and early childhood education centres.

The sharp shift in New Zealand demonstrates that the fight for scientifically-grounded COVID policies aimed at eliminating the virus now depends directly on the development of an independent movement of the working class. This must be directed against the entire political establishment, including the Labour government and the trade unions, and the profit system they defend.



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