

COVID deaths surge in New Zealand

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New Zealand's death toll from COVID-19 is continuing to surge, following the Labour Party-led government's decision to drop almost all remaining public health restrictions. Vaccine mandates and passes are being scrapped on April 4. Crowd limits are also being significantly eased, QR scanning used for contact tracing are no longer required, and the border quarantine system for incoming travellers has been dismantled.

On Tuesday, the country reported 34 COVID-related deaths, a record daily number. A total of 355 people have died in New Zealand with the virus—the toll has increased by 101 in just six days. There are currently 764 COVID-positive people in hospital.

Under the elimination policy, New Zealand had one of the lowest death tolls in the world. Now, epidemiologist Michael Baker told the *New Zealand Herald* on Wednesday, “New Zealand's mortality is moving into the middle or upper range for a high-income country with the exception of Hong Kong, which is extremely high.”

Baker told Radio NZ yesterday that about 12 percent of the country, more than 600,000 people, was known to have had Omicron since the country recorded its first cases nine weeks ago. Since people without symptoms would largely be going untested, the real number of infections is likely far higher.

The surging fatalities expose the criminality of the government's decision in October last year to abandon its previous elimination policy. This was a decision based entirely on satisfying the demands of big business for an end to lockdowns and other constraints on its ability to extract profits from the working class. The trade union bureaucracy fully supports the profit-over-lives policy and has been instrumental in forcing people back into unsafe schools and workplaces.

The *Herald* noted that 80 percent of the deaths have occurred this year. In response to the emergence of the

highly infectious Omicron variant, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern repeated the false claims that society can “live with” the virus because it is “mild” and people can rely on vaccination alone to protect them.

In fact, the *Herald* reported that out of 299 deaths, 99 were people who had received three doses of the Pfizer vaccine, and another 103 had received two doses. According to the Ministry of Health, a total of 5,098 people have been hospitalised with COVID, including 626 people under the age of 20 and 1,541 aged in their twenties or thirties.

There is no data on how many people are suffering from Long COVID, a debilitating condition that can affect the brain and other organs and may impact over 10 percent of people who get the virus.

The government and the corporate media are seeking to downplay the death toll and stoke illusions that things will improve once the country has passed the “peak” of the Omicron outbreak. In a video report on Tuesday, New Zealand's deadliest day of the pandemic, a *Herald* reporter said “the spike is not unexpected and there are positive signs numbers are dropping.”

On Wednesday, COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins told the media, “we are going to continue to see spikes in both case numbers and, sadly, the number of people passing away from COVID-19 over the coming weeks.” He made clear that the government has no intention of doing anything to stop the deaths, stating blandly that this “series of peaks and troughs is not unexpected.”

Hipkins said it was “good news” that case numbers are heading “in a downward direction,” with a seven-day rolling average of 14,969 compared to 17,111 the previous week. In fact, as long as nothing is done to eliminate the virus internationally, it will continue to circulate, causing repeated waves of deaths and severe illnesses, and mutating into potentially more infectious,

vaccine-resistant and deadlier variants.

Other highly-vaccinated countries, with a similar population to New Zealand, are continuing to report significant numbers of COVID deaths after scrapping public health measures. In the last seven days, Denmark recorded 182 deaths, Norway 112, Ireland 55 and Singapore 43.

The virus is now spreading fastest in the Canterbury region in the South Island, including Christchurch, with schools a major source of cases. Yesterday, *Stuff* reported that only 38 of the region's 287 schools remained Omicron-free over the last 10 days.

Despite the government's determination to keep schools and childcare centres open for in-person learning, school attendance plummeted to 67 percent on March 18 due to the large number of infections. More than 200,000 children stayed home on any given day in March. One third of current known cases are among children and teenagers.

Hospitals across the country remain overwhelmed, with as many as 10 to 15 percent of staff unable to work due to COVID, and major delays to non-urgent operations. On March 27, *Newshub* reported that Wellington man Ewen Ritchie was forced to take out a reverse mortgage to pay for his prostate cancer treatment privately after being informed of a five-month wait for a biopsy in the public system.

There is deepening concern in the working class about the "let it rip" policy, although the media focus is largely on the small minority opposed to vaccines and other public health measures. People who can do so are working from home, and downtown areas are largely deserted. Healthcare workers have sought to strike over under-staffing and low pay, only to have their actions suppressed by the unions and banned by the Employment Court.

Stan, an unemployed resident of Levin, whose wife suffers from fibromyalgia and diabetes, told the WSWS he believed "a huge percentage of Kiwis are genuinely concerned and will maintain precautions insofar as they are able."

He was alarmed that "the death toll is rising without the least bit of concern from the government, [and] any left wing criticism of the government is taboo." He said: "We can only hope we don't get COVID, although considering the collapsing of restrictions it can only be a matter of time. It just feels like Russian

roulette." Stan pointed to the lack of public discussion about "who will be affected, how seriously, for how long, or if new strains are incoming."

Claims that Omicron cannot be eliminated are false, as China has repeatedly demonstrated. The agenda of the ruling class, however, is to allow the virus to continue spreading forever, leading to unending sickness, disability and death for millions of people. In a statement on March 14, the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand called on the working class to intervene with its own, socialist program, and to form rank-and-file safety committees to fight for a fully funded zero COVID strategy, in opposition to all the capitalist parties and the unions.



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