

New Zealand experiences deadliest month of the COVID pandemic

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's COVID-19 death toll has increased more than tenfold over the past two months, as a result of the Labour Party-led government's decision to keep schools and non-essential businesses open and to remove most public health restrictions.

The country's total COVID death toll stood at 68 at the beginning of March, when the highly-infectious Omicron wave had just begun to take off. This relatively low number was due to New Zealand's adoption of a zero COVID policy two years ago.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the end of this policy last October, as the government succumbed to pressure from big business, which views lockdowns and all public health measures as an intolerable impediment to profits.

Because of this criminal decision to allow the mass infection of the population, by May 3 the number of COVID deaths had increased to 777. More than half of these occurred in April. Hundreds of people have lost loved ones due to a virus that could have been prevented had the elimination policy been maintained.

According to the Ministry of Health, more than 950,000 people have had COVID, which is almost one in five. Nearly all of these cases were recorded in the last two months. The real total is undoubtedly much higher as the official figures are based on unreliable, self-administered and self-reported rapid antigen tests (RATs). Thousands of those listed as "recovered" will likely be suffering from Long COVID, a set of conditions that can include severe damage to the heart, lungs and brain.

The government is seeking to normalise COVID deaths and behaving as though the pandemic is coming to an end. On Monday, Ardern told a press conference that the tourism industry was recovering, "with our COVID-19 control now a matter of record." None of

the reporters present challenged the false claim that the virus is under control.

Mandatory isolation requirements for international arrivals have been dropped. Airports NZ, Air New Zealand and the Tourism Export Council are now demanding that pre-departure COVID testing requirements also be scrapped. This follows the ending of vaccine mandates, contact tracing systems and masking requirements in schools.

The healthcare system, which was already facing a crisis of understaffing and unmet needs before the pandemic, has been overwhelmed by the Omicron wave. Thousands of nurses and doctors have been infected, and hospitals have been forced to postpone tens of thousands of vital operations.

Nationwide, there were 481 people with COVID in hospital yesterday. Royal NZ College of General Practitioners medical director Dr Bryan Betty told the *Rotorua Daily Post* there were reports of emergency departments "all over the country" being filled to capacity due to "a combination of the pressures that we've been under with COVID, the pressures that we've been under in general practice," as well as an increase in other viral illnesses.

On Monday morning, Christchurch Hospital reported that it was at 109 percent capacity and 180 staff were either sick with COVID or isolating because a household member had the virus. District Health Board chief executive Peter Bramley said COVID case numbers "are not dropping away as quickly as we originally predicted, and we envisage this situation will continue for some time."

Wellington emergency surgeon Dr Kelvin Ward started a petition last month calling for the government to urgently adopt a "vaccines plus" approach to COVID—that is, to introduce public health measures in

addition to a stepped-up vaccination campaign. The open letter was co-written by nine other scientists and public health experts, including epidemiologists Professor Michael Baker and Dr Amanda Kvalsvig. It has been signed by more than 150 doctors and scientists.

In late March 2020, during the initial wave of the pandemic, Dr Ward initiated a healthcare workers' petition calling for a nationwide lockdown. It quickly gained support from over 150,000 people, despite opposition from the New Zealand Nurses Organisation and the teacher unions, which falsely claimed that schools could safely stay open.

The Ardern government, fearing that a movement of the working class could emerge outside the control of the trade unions, decided to act and imposed one of the world's strictest lockdowns, which succeeded in reducing case numbers to zero.

The new petition does not call for a lockdown, but for the reinstatement of mandatory masking in schools, as well as carbon dioxide monitors and air filtration systems, and "clear ventilation standards for indoor public spaces."

The experts demand better public education about the nature of the airborne transmission of the virus and how to prevent it and government funding to ensure a good supply of N95 and similar high-quality masks, rather than the inadequate surgical masks widely in use.

They also call for a stronger effort to boost vaccination rates, particularly for children. At present, just over 2.6 million people—half the population—have received the three doses of the Pfizer vaccine required to give significant protection from Omicron.

The experts state that "COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease, but transmission is preventable." They warn: "Relying on 'personal responsibility', without effective public health measures, will result in repeated waves of infection, an overloaded and dysfunctional healthcare system, and ongoing disruption to daily life. This scenario is currently playing out around the world. Instead, a collective approach is required that focuses on minimising transmission by means of public health policies."

The WSWs supports the public health measures advocated in the "Vaccines Plus" petition, but insists that they must be part of a comprehensive, fully resourced elimination strategy. This includes the

immediate closure of schools and non-essential businesses, with support provided to workers and small business owners, until case numbers are reduced to zero. The mitigationist approach, which accepts the transmission of COVID-19 in the community, will not stop ongoing deaths and severe illnesses or the emergence of new and more dangerous variants.

China has demonstrated that Omicron can be stamped out in the world's most populous country, saving millions of lives. But the continual reintroduction of COVID into China shows that elimination must be adopted as a global strategy.

How is this to be achieved? It is no use appealing to capitalist governments, including the Ardern government in New Zealand, which have allowed the virus to spread out of control. Internationally, governments have presided over more than 20 million deaths from COVID-19, proving their sole concern is to satisfy the demands of the banks and big business.

The working class needs to take up a political fight for a scientific, public health response aimed at saving lives regardless of the cost to the corporate and financial elite.

In its statement on March 14, the Socialist Equality Group called on workers to build rank-and-file safety committees in schools, hospitals and every other workplace—independent of the unions, which have collaborated with the pro-business reopening agenda. The task of these committees will be to unite workers in New Zealand, as well as internationally, against the agenda of mass infection, and to bring an end to the pandemic.



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