

Mother in New Zealand denounces pressure to send children back to school

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a single mother in South Auckland, as part of the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, about the growing pressure she faces to send her two primary school aged children back to school, while the pandemic rages out of control.

COVID-19 has spread like wildfire across New Zealand, which has just experienced its deadliest month of the pandemic, so far. Deaths with COVID have shot up from 59 at the end of last year to more than 845 as of May 5. At least one in five people have been infected, and hospitals are overwhelmed with COVID patients.

This disaster is the direct result of the Labour Party-led government's decision last October to abandon its previous elimination policy, which used lockdowns and border quarantine to reduce cases to zero. At the behest of big business and the financial elite, these measures were scrapped, and schools and businesses were reopened with the assistance of the trade unions.

The parent, who we will call Jennifer, is aged in her forties and suffers from asthma. She fears that her children could contract COVID and spread it to her. She pointed out that the Ministry of Health website lists "chronic lung or airways disease" (which includes asthma) among the conditions placing people at "higher risk of more severe illness if they contract COVID-19." Jennifer said the ministry also "gives advice for the vulnerable groups, and the number one piece of advice is: avoid getting COVID."

Despite the government telling people to take responsibility for their own safety, the Ministry of Education and school administrators are pushing parents to send their children back into unsafe classrooms. The government has announced a crackdown on "truancy," with \$88 million to be dedicated to addressing the issue in this year's budget.

Jennifer said she had repeatedly tried to arrange for her

children's school to send learning materials so that they could study at home, but it has refused to do so. At the start of Term 2 in May, she emailed the school again asking for the learning packs. The principal replied, saying that the children should be attending "in person" and that the school had asked the Ministry of Education to "have a discussion" about this with Jennifer. She is still waiting for the ministry to call her.

"Is it okay for them to force me to put myself at medical risk because of truancy issues?" Jennifer asked. "Is it not okay for me to want learning packs so I can instruct my children at home where I know we are safe? I am their only caregiver. If I die, then what? Is the principal going to adopt them? Getting COVID is not a risk or a hardship I am willing to go through for me or my children."

She questioned what the ministry could say to justify sending her children back to school. "They're not going to change my mind about having the vulnerability and school not being safe, and remote learning. They can't change my mind about having asthma and needing to avoid COVID. What do they think they're going to change?"

Jennifer explained: "The government has dismantled all of our COVID regulations. So the only logical thing for me and people with other vulnerabilities to do is to go further away from the public. We're not given other options."

After schools reopened nationwide in February, the highly infectious Omicron variant spread rapidly across New Zealand. South Auckland, a working-class area, is one of the worst-affected parts of the country, with Middlemore Hospital frequently overwhelmed with patients.

Manurewa High School principal, Pete Jones, told *One News* that in the first term of 2022, attendance dropped to just 35 percent "because we had so many COVID cases in the community." Nationwide, the Principals' Federation

says 67 percent of students are attending school “regularly,” which is defined as more than 90 percent of the time.

Jennifer said those children not attending school probably lived with vulnerable family members, like herself.

Contrary to repeated false statements by politicians and the media, children face significant risks from COVID. On May 4, the Ministry of Health reported the death of a child aged under 10 and a person aged in their teens who had the virus. Jennifer pointed out that vaccines did not make people “invincible” and that “everything is uncertain and still being researched. Long COVID is still being researched. How can we put our kids in harm’s way without having any complete research about it?”

On April 13, the government lifted a mask mandate which covered most, but not all, school students. The removal of the mandate was opposed by experts, who have also criticised the lack of ventilation in schools. Disability Rights Commissioner Paula Tesoriero is also calling for masks to be reintroduced in schools.

Many children are unvaccinated, or not fully vaccinated, making schools ideal for spreading the virus. Vaccine mandates for school staff have also been removed.

Jennifer said the real issue was that schools should not be open in the first place. “When the school’s enrolment administrator called me, they said: ‘We have masks and we keep kids far apart in the classroom.’ I said: ‘Well, my son won’t wear a mask for more than two minutes. He just won’t.’” Teachers, who are stressed and overworked, are not in a position to enforce proper mask use, particularly with younger children.

As a recent immigrant from the United States, who came to New Zealand to study, Jennifer said she was shocked by the about-face in the Labour government’s management of the pandemic, and by the complacency that is now being encouraged.

“I had to go and get my booster shot at the pharmacy and everyone was walking around like normal, lining up next to each other, nobody wearing a mask,” she said. “I think another thing people keep forgetting about COVID is you don’t just recover like the flu. Some people become permanently disabled—if you don’t die from it.”

Jennifer told the WSWS that one of her childhood friends had died of COVID last year in the US, aged in his thirties. “We grew up together as kids in the ‘90s, played video games together, went to school together and got into trouble together. Now he’s dead.”

She felt “very disappointed” that New Zealand had

adopted the “every man for himself” approach from the United States. “I would relate that to the Republican [Party] ideal, which is really sad, because Labour is supposed to be left of centre, I thought.”

When Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the end of the zero COVID policy, during New Zealand’s outbreak of Delta last year, Jennifer said “my heart sank immediately,” even though she had seen it coming. “They couldn’t keep it up forever, I could tell that they were breaking just by the way they were reporting [on the cases]. I knew that because of what other countries were doing that they were going to do it too. For some reason, New Zealand likes to copy Australia, and Australia copies America: it’s a bad domino line.”

In the lead-up to the change of policy in October, former Prime Minister John Key, and numerous pro-business commentators, had demanded that New Zealand reopen its border and “live with” the virus, saying the elimination policy had turned the country into a “hermit kingdom.”

Commenting on this propaganda, Jennifer said: “The way I feel about it is: So what if we’re a hermit kingdom, if it’s going to keep people safe? I’m from a place where we have a lot of tornadoes, and during a tornado you take shelter. When the tornado is gone, you come out of the shelter. You don’t come out of the shelter in the middle of a tornado.”

She said New Zealand’s public health response was “going backwards and it just doesn’t make any sense. It seems like every time they have the opportunity to listen to actual microbiologists or epidemiologists about what should be happening, [the government] completely ignores” the experts’ advice.



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