

More than 1,000 COVID-19 deaths in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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This week New Zealand's total COVID-19 death toll passed 1,000, reaching 1,039 today.

The stark reality is that hundreds and hundreds of people are dead who would still be alive if the Labour Party-led government had maintained its zero COVID policy, instead of switching to the homicidal program of mass infection.

Acting on the instructions of the corporate and financial elite, the government has put an end to lockdowns and reopened all schools and nonessential businesses. As in every country, the pro-capitalist trade unions played a key role in preventing any organised opposition from the working class to this criminal agenda.

Last October, when Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the change in policy—without any pretence of consulting the population, and going against the advice of public health experts—New Zealand had recorded only 32 deaths from the pandemic. Since then, the toll has increased about thirty-fold. The vast majority of the country's infections and deaths took place following the start of the school year in February.

More than 1 million COVID-19 cases have been officially recorded, that is, one in five people, but disease modeller Dion O'Neale told Radio NZ this week that “probably by this point around half of the population, very roughly, have been infected.” As in every country except China, there is no effort made to systematically test non-symptomatic people. Testing is now being left up to individuals, who must obtain their own, notoriously unreliable, rapid antigen test kits.

On May 14, Ardern herself tested positive for COVID and went into isolation, after her partner tested positive about a week earlier.

The government's response to the surging death toll was grotesque. In a statement on May 18, COVID-19

Response Minister Chris Hipkins dishonestly declared, “We recognise the pain of losing a family member or friend, and do not wish to diminish that.” He then proceeded to boast about New Zealand's relatively low number of deaths.

He claimed that the death rate in New Zealand has not exceeded that of the previous two years of the pandemic, and “this reflected the benefits of our COVID-19 response in reducing exposure to the virus and protecting our more vulnerable New Zealanders.”

Associate Minister Dr Ayesha Verrall added that “if New Zealand had a similar rate of COVID-19 mortality as the United States, we would be reporting approximately 15,000 deaths from COVID-19 today.”

The ministers did not mention the obvious fact that the country's relatively low toll is due to public health measures which have now been removed. Along with reopening the economy, the government has ditched mandatory masking in schools, dismantled contact tracing systems, ended vaccine mandates and passes, and closed border quarantine hotels.

Just 2.6 million people have received a third (or booster) dose of the Pfizer vaccine—slightly more than half the population—leaving millions of people without substantial protection from severe disease. Vaccination alone is not enough to prevent significant numbers of deaths. According to the Ministry of Health, out of 967 deaths, 261 (26.9 percent)? had received two doses of vaccine and 488 (50.4 percent)? had received three.

According to the Worldometers data aggregation website, New Zealand recorded 112 deaths in the last seven days, a rate of 22 per million. This is the fifth-highest death rate in the world—higher than anywhere in Europe except Finland and Iceland (which are ranked third and fourth). By comparison, in the same period the UK recorded 16 deaths per million, and Australia

12.

In addition to the deaths, more than 10,000 people have received hospital treatment for COVID, including 714 children under 10 years of age. There is no end in sight. As New Zealand heads into winter, experts are predicting a further surge in hospitalisations and deaths, brought about by a combination of COVID, influenza and the respiratory virus RSV.

A recent report by the International Science Council, led by New Zealand's former chief scientist, Professor Sir Peter Gluckman, predicted that in 2027 there would still be regular surges of COVID-19 worldwide, due to the failure of governments to stop the virus. The report noted that, in addition to more than 15 million deaths, about one in 10 people who are infected develop long-term debilitating symptoms from Long COVID—which can affect the brain, lungs, heart and other organs.

The University of Otago's Dr Ross Griffiths has predicted that at least 200,000 people in New Zealand could develop Long COVID. That is based on an estimate of 2 million people infected, meaning the real numbers suffering from long-term symptoms could be even higher.

Hospitals, which were understaffed and overstretched before the pandemic, have been thrown into crisis, with 10 to 15 percent of staff becoming sick, and wards overwhelmed with patients. These conditions, along with the soaring cost of living, are driving workers into struggle—including 10,000 healthcare workers who held a nationwide strike on May 16.

The government has no response, other than telling people to get used to endless waves of illness and death. Minister Hipkins told the media this week that COVID is “not going to go away as a health condition. It is going to be something we live with over the medium to long-term.”

Hipkins, who is also the education minister, has downplayed the mass infection of children in schools as something families should just accept. He told *Newsroom* on May 18: “I really don't think parents should be as anxious about that as some are—a proportion of children will get COVID, that's just the reality of living in a community where COVID is circulating.” He said people expressing concern about the virus ripping through schools were “catastrophising.”

The claim that children being infected is nothing to

worry about is an outrageous lie aimed at justifying the ruling elite's “let it rip” agenda. Hipkins is foreshadowing a crackdown on “truancy,” targeting large numbers of parents—including many with diabetes, asthma and other health conditions—who have decided to keep their children at home out of entirely justified fears that they will get COVID and spread it to the rest of the household.

The Labour government's wholesale abandonment of public health measures demonstrates that only the intervention of the working class can stop this worsening COVID disaster and save thousands of lives. The Socialist Equality Group has called for workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions, to fight for a fully funded elimination strategy, starting with the immediate closure of all non-essential businesses and schools with full compensation for all affected workers and small business people.



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