

New Zealand government maintains “let it rip” policy despite worsening crisis in hospitals

Tom Peters
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The disastrous situation in New Zealand’s hospitals continues to worsen, with ongoing deaths from COVID-19, growing hospitalisations for influenza and other winter illnesses, and a severe staffing shortage.

Yesterday, another 17 people died with COVID, including a child under 10 years of age. A total of 362 people were in hospital with the virus.

Altogether, the Ministry of Health has recorded 1,432 COVID-related deaths. All but 59 of these occurred in 2022, during the highly infectious Omicron wave, and as a direct result of the Labour Party-led government’s criminal decision last October to end its zero COVID policy.

The government put the demands of big business for a return to work ahead of protecting the health and lives of the population. No lockdowns have been implemented this year, the border has fully reopened, vaccine mandates have been scrapped, and schools and nonessential businesses are open.

According to the Worldometer website, New Zealand recorded 14 deaths per million people in the last seven days. This is the sixth-highest rate in the world, surpassed only by Taiwan, Portugal and three Caribbean island countries.

On June 20, Radio NZ’s Corin Dann asked Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern whether she was considering reintroducing measures such as mandatory masks in schools, “given the pressures on ED [hospital emergency departments], the ongoing deaths, the ongoing hospitalisations.”

In response, Ardern defended the present settings, which amount to a policy of mass infection. She noted that the government had eased public health restrictions when the COVID hospitalisation rate was even higher

than it is now. She added that, in some hospitals, flu is now “a greater cause of respiratory hospitalisation than COVID-19.”

Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland is reportedly seeing a fourfold increase in the number of influenza patients compared with 2019 and previous years. Influenza, however, can be controlled with the same measures used to stop COVID-19. In 2020 and 2021, thanks to New Zealand’s elimination strategy, the flu virus practically disappeared.

The government is seeking to normalise the crisis in public hospitals. Health minister Andrew Little told Radio NZ yesterday that hospitals were “under pressure,” but added that “every hospital scales back planned care every winter, there is nothing unusual about that.”

Hospital overcrowding is having tragic consequences. On June 15, a 51-year-old woman arrived at the Middlemore ED with a severe headache, but went home after being told she could not be seen for several hours. She died hours later of a brain haemorrhage.

A doctor at the hospital told *Stuff* that the woman might have been saved if she had been seen immediately. They said: “We don’t know what to do, we are suffering in silence. We know how bad everything is but no one will acknowledge it.”

Stuff also reported on June 17 that a woman who had a miscarriage was sent home from Wellington Hospital and forced to wait two days before her dead baby could be delivered, because of short staffing.

On June 21, hospitals in Wellington deferred all non-urgent operations for another four weeks, with the District Health Board saying the current staffing “challenges” will continue for “the foreseeable future.”

Thousands of people, many living with painful and debilitating conditions, are unable to access the care they need.

A recent survey by the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists of heads of department and clinical directors at several different hospitals, found an overall staffing shortage of 22 percent. The Wairarapa District Health Board in the lower North Island reported the worst shortage of 50 percent. The survey also found that the real level of need throughout the country exceeds the publicly advertised staff vacancies.

A worker at the Taranaki District Health Board told the WSWS: “Almost all healthcare workers are getting tired. Hospitals can’t fill out vacancies, as the number of people applying for jobs in this sector is getting lower day by day.” He said the staffing shortage was largely because of a “significant reduction of international workforce after the COVID-19 border closure,” and the refusal of the government to recognise all overseas nursing qualifications.

The worker pointed out that a large number of hospital patients had been transferred from aged care facilities, where conditions have deteriorated sharply.

A nurse at a Wellington retirement home told the WSWS that understaffing in the sector was “terrible.” Across the aged care sector, he said, “we currently have a shortage of 2,000 registered nurses.” This has forced some facilities to close, while others have stopped accepting new residents.

At his workplace, there is a shortage of six nurses. “We need three nurses per shift, but usually we are getting two.” This means in an average shift, one nurse must look after 20 to 30 residents. This impacts on patient care, “because sometimes they are getting their medication late,” and the nurse said he worries about what might happen in the event of an emergency.

He also said immigration restrictions had exacerbated the crisis. A large proportion of nurses are migrants, especially from India and the Philippines. The border has now reopened, but the nurse said overseas registered nurses were choosing to move to Australia because of New Zealand’s low wages.

Aged care residents are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Staff are required to take a rapid antigen test every day, and visits are limited to one hour, but visitors do not face the same testing requirements. Despite the precautions, the Wellington nurse said,

“among our staff more than 50 percent have had COVID,” requiring them to stay home for seven days and placing pressure on other workers to work long hours. “I am working more than 60 hours per week,” he said.

In response to health minister Andrew Little’s statements that the healthcare system is “coping,” the nurse said: “Which politician will say ‘we are in terrible conditions’? They will always say, ‘We are good, we are under control.’ All over the world, all politicians tell lies.” He said the minister should “come into the community and ask how terrible it is.”

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation yesterday criticised Little’s statements as “absolutely disrespectful” to healthcare workers. But the unions have fully collaborated with the government’s reopening policy, herding people back into unsafe schools and other workplaces.

The fight for a fully-resourced elimination strategy, including an immediate lockdown with compensation for workers and small businesses, must be taken up by workers in a rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade unions. This requires the formation of new organisations—rank-and-file workplace safety committees, controlled by workers themselves—and a political movement of the working class, in opposition to Labour and its allies, for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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