

New Zealand government refuses to stop mass COVID infection, as doctors warn of catastrophe

Tom Peters
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On Thursday, New Zealand's COVID-19 response minister Ayesha Verrall and director-general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield held a press conference in a desperate attempt to appear to be doing something to address the surging toll of hospitalisations and deaths from the coronavirus.

According to the *New York Times*, of countries with more than a million people, New Zealand's seven-day average COVID death rate is now second highest, following Taiwan. On July 13, there were 29 deaths reported, the highest daily total since May 18; the following day another 23 people died with the virus including a child under 10 years old.

Hospitals across the country are overwhelmed, as the highly infectious Omicron BA.5 variant takes off, alongside a flu epidemic. In the past three weeks, the number of people hospitalised with COVID has more than doubled from 300 on June 24 to 765 on July 14.

New Zealand's total number of deaths from the pandemic is now 1,760, about 96 percent of which occurred this year, after all schools and businesses were allowed to reopen and the virus was allowed to spread largely unimpeded.

Verrall declared yesterday: "To get through this stage of the pandemic we're going to have to use the most effective measures we have to reduce the spread of both COVID-19 and influenza."

This is simply a lie. The Labour Party-led government refuses to reintroduce public health measures that would immediately save lives—namely, a return to the Zero-COVID policy, including the immediate closure of schools and nonessential businesses. This elimination policy kept New Zealand largely free from the deadly virus during the first two

years of the pandemic, until it was scrapped last October on the instructions of big business, which views lockdowns as an intolerable obstacle to profit-making.

The main thrust of Verrall and Bloomfield's presentation was to urge ordinary people to follow the minimal rules and recommendations that exist around masking. Bloomfield outlined the surge of the pandemic internationally, driven by the new BA.4 and BA.5 variants. In New Zealand there have been nearly 10,000 new COVID cases per day reported over the last seven days, and an increasing proportion of those are reinfections.

Bloomfield said that according to the government's modelling, "if we do nothing," then COVID hospitalisations will soon reach a peak of more than 1,200, and daily reported cases will double to around 21,000.

In response to these stark predictions, the government is not taking any measures to seriously reduce the rate of infection. Bloomfield merely stated that "if we all take steps to limit our exposure to the virus and to protect ourselves," then the peak for hospitalisations could be lowered by 20 percent to 950 people.

In other words, the Ministry of Health's best case scenario is for thousands more hospitalisations and hundreds more deaths over the winter. Beyond that, ongoing infections and reinfections will certainly kill thousands more people by the end of the year and leave tens of thousands with debilitating Long COVID.

The only concrete changes announced yesterday were to make ineffectual medical masks and rapid antigen tests (RATs) freely available, and to widen the criteria for antiviral drugs. N95 and P2 masks, which are much

more effective against COVID, will only be distributed for free to “medically vulnerable” people. The Green Party, which is part of the government, applauded these measures and took credit on social media for pressuring the government to provide free masks—even though, by the government’s own admission, this won’t prevent thousands more deaths.

Asked by Radio NZ (RNZ) why the government does not “make it mandatory to wear a mask in all indoor settings outside of your home,” instead of just some, Verrall replied that this cannot be done because it “impacts the running of many businesses.”

The government also refuses to reintroduce mask mandates in schools, despite pleas from public health experts to do so, or to take any other steps such as limiting gathering sizes. Epidemiologist Michael Baker told the *New Zealand Herald*: “It’s almost like we’re denying transmission happens at schools which is bizarre. I think people will look back in horror at our laissez-faire approach to this.”

On Saturday, the All Blacks national rugby team is scheduled to play Ireland at Sky Stadium in Wellington in front of a sold out crowd of 37,500 people—the biggest event in the city since the pandemic began. Inevitably, many of these people will get COVID and become severely ill. This sort of super-spreading event is becoming common, as the government seeks to normalise mass infection.

Meanwhile, a survey of 923 doctors by the New Zealand Women in Medicine trust, released this week, found that 93.5 percent said there was definitely a crisis in the public health workforce, and 6.3 percent said there was probably a crisis. The trust penned an open letter to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, saying the system was at risk of a “catastrophic collapse.”

According to *Stuff*, one emergency doctor wrote in the survey that so many nurses were getting sick or burnt out “that we have to close areas of the department or work there on our own with no nursing support... Our triage nurses are so afraid that someone will die in the waiting room—so they are all resigning as well.”

Hospitals are so overrun that tens of thousands of operations are being repeatedly postponed. On July 11, RNZ reported that across much of the country—in Northland, South Auckland, Auckland Central, Waikato, Wellington and Canterbury—surgery was being performed “only on cases considered life-

threatening or unable to be delayed.”

Newshub reported that at Christchurch Hospital, 1,200 elective surgeries have been postponed over the past two years, including 450 cancer operations. Such delays can have life-threatening consequences.

This morning, Association of General Surgeons president Rowan French told RNZ the government’s new measures would not be enough to alleviate the enormous pressure on hospitals. He warned that if hospitalisations hit 1,200, not everyone who needs urgent care will be able to get it.

The opposition National Party, meanwhile, is calling on the government to remove vaccine mandates for healthcare workers, in order to bring a small number of unvaccinated workers back into hospitals. National leader Christopher Luxon, who recently visited Singapore, Ireland and the UK, has declared in a number of media interviews that “the rest of the world’s moving on” from COVID.

In fact, while corporations and governments increasingly act as though the pandemic is over, the BA.5 variant is fuelling a resurgence worldwide. The UK has just passed 200,000 deaths from COVID, with 294 deaths in the week to July 13. Across the European Union, daily deaths have risen by 60 percent in the past three weeks.

Workers in New Zealand must oppose the policy of mass infection backed by every party in parliament, and take up a fight for a fully-funded elimination strategy, starting with the immediate closure of nonessential businesses and schools. The main obstacle, in NZ and internationally, is the trade unions, which have accepted and continue to enforce the reopening policies, which are sacrificing workers’ lives for the sake of profit.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers and young people to contact us to discuss what must be done to end the pandemic, including the urgent need for new organisations: rank-and-file safety committees independent of the pro-capitalist unions, so that workers can take matters into their own hands.



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