

New Zealand goes from zero COVID to world-leading infections and deaths: Workers must fight for an elimination strategy

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The disastrous situation in New Zealand reinforces the urgent need for working people to take up the fight for a global strategy to eliminate COVID-19. We urge readers to share this statement and to contact the Socialist Equality Group to discuss the practical steps and the socialist perspective required to save lives and end the pandemic.

Over the past six months, since the start of the school year in February, New Zealand has gone from having one of the lowest COVID-19 infection rates, to now being one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Total deaths within 28 days of a coronavirus infection have sky-rocketed from about 60 at the end of January to more than 2,000 by the end of July.

According to the Worldometers website, New Zealand recorded 36 COVID-related deaths per million people in the seven days ending July 29—the highest death rate of any country.

This horrific toll is the outcome of deliberate policy decisions by the Labour Party-led government, which includes the Green Party. For most of the pandemic, NZ remained largely free from the coronavirus, thanks to a relatively strict nationwide lockdown imposed from March 26 to May 14, 2020, which reduced cases to zero, as well as further lockdowns in Auckland and the imposition of border quarantine measures.

Last October, however, following the instructions of the New Zealand and international business elite, prime minister Jacinda Ardern announced an end to the previous commitment to reducing COVID cases to zero. She falsely declared that the Delta variant could not be eliminated. A lockdown that had been in place in Auckland, the centre of a Delta outbreak, was weakened and then lifted in December, allowing the virus to spread nationwide.

Without any pretence of democratic process, and against the advice of public health experts, Labour decreed that there would be no more lockdowns, and that schools must remain open for in-person learning. Following the arrival of Omicron in 2022, vaccine mandates were scrapped, mask mandates removed from schools and the border quarantine system was dismantled.

The Ardern government has joined capitalist governments in every country, with the exception of China, in embracing a criminal policy of mass infection. In the United States, a Biden administration official recently summed up the position of the ruling class, declaring that “everyone is going to get COVID.”

The working class, however, cannot accept the “new normal” of

endless waves of death and severe illness. The policies adopted around the world have already led to more than 20 million COVID deaths, the vast majority of which could have been prevented. Millions more have debilitating long-term illnesses, known as Long COVID.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on workers to take up a political fight for a fully-funded public health strategy to eliminate COVID-19. This fight must be conducted in opposition to the Labour Party-led government and all of the parliamentary parties, as well as the trade unions. The unions act as enforcers of the “let it rip” agenda. On behalf of the state and corporations, they have played the central role in herding children into schools and adults into workplaces infested with COVID.

New organisations—rank-and-file safety committees—must be built in schools, hospitals and other workplaces, to coordinate opposition to the homicidal policy of mass infection, both on a national and international scale. The SEG supports the call made last year by the International Committee of the Fourth International for the creation of an International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees “to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale.”

Workers must reject the lies spread by politicians, the media and unions to justify the criminal “let it rip” policy. These include the claims that Omicron is “mild,” that children are not significant spreaders of the virus, and that the crisis will resolve itself through so-called “hybrid immunity” resulting from vaccinations and infection.

If the current trend continues, experts estimate that COVID deaths could reach 3,500 or more by the end of the year, increasing the overall mortality rate by more than 10 percent. Over 1.6 million coronavirus cases have been officially recorded in New Zealand, and it is likely that more than half the country’s 5 million people have had the virus.

Over 23,000 people have reported being infected more than once, and there is increasing evidence that infection provides no lasting immunity but can, in fact, significantly weaken a person’s defences against disease.

In the past month, the number of people hospitalised with COVID has more than doubled, from just under 400 at the end of

June to more than 800 as of July 28. Rundown and underfunded public hospitals, also facing a surge in influenza and other winter illnesses, are dangerously overcrowded and have been forced to defer tens of thousands of surgical procedures, including for cancer and cardiac patients.

The situation in hospitals, which doctors increasingly describe as a “catastrophe,” is fuelling anger and opposition. Hundreds of doctors and experts have signed a petition urging the government to adopt a “Vaccines Plus” strategy to suppress COVID transmission. Thousands of healthcare workers have held strikes in opposition to unsafe staffing levels and low pay. In Australia and New Zealand, there is growing support for Zero COVID advocates such as Dr David Berger, who is facing unjustified disciplinary action by Australian authorities.

The government, however, has rejected all appeals for stronger mitigation measures. Ardern told a media conference on July 25 that “the settings that we have [limited mask mandates and self-isolation requirements] actually will make a marked difference,” and that New Zealand was in a better position than “a number of other countries.” None of the reporters present asked the prime minister to explain why, if this is true, New Zealand’s daily COVID death rate is among the highest in the world.

The government’s stance underscores that the fight against the pandemic is not simply a medical question: it is a political issue that requires a coordinated struggle by the working class.

The entire parliamentary and media establishment insists that the population must “live with” the virus. Opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon has referred favourably to European countries “moving on” from COVID—even as Omicron surges across the continent, killing thousands every day.

These parties speak for the corporate and financial aristocracy, which views lockdowns and other effective and proven public health measures as an intolerable imposition on the “right” to extract profit from workers. The schools must remain open so that parents can continue working, regardless of how many thousands of people have to become severely ill and die as a result.

Workers must recognise the reactionary role played by the trade union bureaucracy in enforcing this agenda. In a July 25 interview with NewstalkZB, Post-Primary Teachers’ Association president Melanie Webber again echoed the false propaganda that schools are “safe,” absurdly adding that “a lot of transmission is actually happening outside of schools rather than within schools.”

Internationally, the pandemic has starkly exposed the character of the unions, which long ago ceased to be workers’ organisations in any meaningful sense. They are controlled by privileged bureaucracies that collaborate with big business and the state to divide and suppress the working class.

Rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, will break the straitjacket of the unions and fight to unify the working class in New Zealand with workers internationally behind political demands based on the principle that no expense should be spared to save thousands of lives.

Schools and nonessential businesses should be immediately closed until COVID-19 case numbers are reduced to zero. The most effective public health measures, like those used in China, must be adopted, including mass testing to identify and isolate all

chains of transmission of the virus. A hotel quarantine system must be re-established for people entering the country, with safe and properly staffed facilities to prevent the virus from escaping.

All workers and small business owners unable to work during the lockdown should be fully compensated, including part-time and casual workers. No one should be forced to choose between risking their lives in an unsafe workplace and being unable to feed their families and pay their rent.

Workers in essential industries, including healthcare and food production and distribution, must be provided with high-quality N95 masks, as well as air filters and carbon dioxide monitors, and other measures to ensure their safety.

Businesses, union leaders and bourgeois politicians alike will insist that an elimination strategy is unaffordable and will damage “the economy,” meaning profits. Workers should reject such claims with contempt. Over the past two years the government has made tens of billions of dollars available to subsidise big business, while the Reserve Bank has printed more than \$50 billion for quantitative easing to support the commercial banks.

While wages are being slashed by inflation, the rich are richer than ever. Treasury estimates that company profits have increased by 60 percent over the past two years. If funding is required to support the zero COVID strategy, then it should be confiscated from the record-breaking profits of the banks and corporations.

Those who claim that society cannot afford to stop COVID-19 are defending a rotten social system that is incompatible with the most fundamental rights to life and to health. The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to draw the necessary, far-reaching political conclusion: that capitalism must be abolished and society restructured along socialist lines, so that the vast resources hoarded by the rich can be used to eliminate social inequality, put an end to wars, guarantee decent healthcare and other social rights, and develop a scientific, internationally-coordinated response to the pandemic and the climate crisis.



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