

New Zealand government ends COVID mask mandates

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On Monday, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the end of mask mandates and other public health measures. Even as thousands of people are becoming infected with COVID and dozens die from the virus every week, the Labour Party-led government is joining most other governments in behaving as though the pandemic is over.

To reduce the population's access to information about the pandemic, and encourage maximum complacency, the reporting of case numbers, deaths and hospitalisations will shift from a daily to a weekly schedule—the same policy that has been adopted by the Labor government in Australia.

The inevitable result will be a resurgence in infections, hospitalisations and deaths, as has occurred internationally. The homicidal policy of mass infection, which has led to about 22 million deaths worldwide, has now been imposed in every country except China.

People in New Zealand will no longer be required to wear masks except in healthcare and aged care settings. This is a major shift. Until now, masks were required in supermarkets, retail outlets, and on public transport and airlines. The government scrapped mandatory masking for schools earlier this year, despite schools being a major source of COVID infections.

The last remaining vaccination mandates, for healthcare workers, will be abolished. Incoming travellers no longer need to be vaccinated and do not need to be tested for COVID following arrival. The government has also ditched the requirement for household contacts of positive cases to isolate at home for any period.

Ardern could barely contain her excitement as she announced these changes, telling a press conference: “This is the time when finally, rather than feeling that COVID dictates what happens to us, our lives and our future, we take control back, as we continue to drive economic activity and our recovery.”

Instead of being guided by the principles of public health, the reckless and criminal policy of letting COVID rip is dictated by the demands of big business that nothing be allowed to interfere with “economic activity,” i.e., the accumulation of profits.

All businesses and schools must be kept open without restrictions, regardless of the cost to people's health and lives. Masks, the most visible daily reminder of the coronavirus, must come off, in order to promote the lie that, in Ardern's words, “the worst of the pandemic is, in many ways, over.”

In reality, since Ardern announced in October 2021 that New Zealand would end its zero-COVID policy, deaths from the virus have soared from fewer than 30 to almost 2,000. These deaths were the entirely preventable outcome of ending all lockdowns and reopening nonessential businesses and schools during the Delta and Omicron waves, allowing COVID to spread everywhere. The trade union bureaucracy played the key role in suppressing any opposition, among teachers, healthcare workers and others, to the reopening agenda.

Ardern contrasted New Zealand's death toll with the “tragic loss of 15,500 people in Scotland,” which has a similar population. The difference is only because, under pressure from healthcare workers and others, the NZ government was forced to adopt an elimination strategy in March 2020, including one of the world's strictest lockdowns. After being re-elected in 2020 largely on the basis of this policy, Labour succumbed to business pressure to scrap it, against the advice of public health experts.

This year, New Zealand's daily deaths per capita overtook many countries in Europe and America. During July 2022, coronavirus became New Zealand's leading cause of death and the country recorded among the highest COVID-related deaths per capita in the world. While infections and deaths have fallen in recent weeks,

there are still 255 people in hospital with COVID, nearly 11,000 active cases, and New Zealand continues to record 50 to 60 deaths per week.

More deadly waves are inevitable as the virus is allowed to circulate unimpeded in every country, except China, infecting billions of people and mutating into more infectious and vaccine-evading variants.

The removal of almost all public health restrictions provoked angry and dismayed responses from public health experts.

Auckland University public health expert Rhys Jones tweeted: “Disabled and immunocompromised people can now be 100% certain it is unsafe to go out in public.” He asked: “Who is the govt getting its public health advice from? Voices For Freedom?”

Voices for Freedom is the anti-vax group that helped organise the occupation of parliament’s lawn for three weeks earlier this year. The Ardern government has adopted all the demands of the far-right protesters for an end to public health mandates.

Disability advocate and lawyer Huhana Hickey told *Newshub* on September 3, in opposition to ditching mask mandates: “This is eugenics, and I thought we’d dealt with that years ago. It’s the ‘let’s just let it rip, let’s open it up,’ [approach] and disabled, immune-compromised [people] will just have to run the gauntlet. If they survive, they survive. If they die, they die.”

Epidemiologist Dr Amanda Kvalsvig also warned that the government’s decisions would place disabled and immunocompromised people at greater risk, and increase the risk of people getting Long COVID. She said: “Damage from Covid-19 can be seen in every organ system including the heart and brain... New Zealanders should be advised to avoid getting Covid-19 and to avoid getting reinfected, and should be given the information and tools to do so.”

Emergency doctor Gary Payinda wrote in a Twitter thread: “Politicians have sold the population a myth that everything’s perfectly fine, it’s over and we’re past it. It would have been far more responsible to blatantly tell people the truth, that there is harm to COVID infection, and that the only logical policy is to take simple steps to avoid infection, and to avoid spreading it.

“You want to get infected with COVID as infrequently as possible. Instead we’re promoting reinfection. Illogical. Especially for a disease that can cause inflammatory and clotting complications. Nonsensical really.”

Hospitals, understaffed and overcrowded even before

the pandemic, remain in a constant state of crisis, with emergency departments overwhelmed. According to *Stuff*, between August 15, 2021, and June 26, 2022, 13,410 surgeries were cancelled nationally, leaving thousands of people becoming sicker due to delayed treatment.

Ardern’s announcement was applauded by business organisations, including Business NZ, Hospitality NZ, the Auckland Chamber of Business and Retail NZ, and the corporate media. Right-wing National Party leader Christopher Luxon, and far-right ACT Party leader David Seymour likewise supported the move.

The Green Party’s COVID spokesperson Teanau Tuiono sought to distance his party from the decision, saying: “The near complete removal of longstanding protections will be of considerable concern for immunocompromised and disabled wh?nau [people] whose wellbeing should be at the centre of the government’s response.”

The party, which is part of the government, calls for minimal and inadequate mitigations, and does not advocate a return to a properly-funded elimination strategy. Tuiono stated: “We will be living with new waves of the infection for many years to come,” even though China, and New Zealand earlier in the pandemic, proved that cases and deaths can be reduced to virtually zero with scientific public health measures.

The working class cannot accept the ruling elite’s demand that they “live with” a coronavirus that has killed tens of millions of people and permanently disabled many millions more. In a statement on August 1, the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand called 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.

We call on workers to distribute this statement and to contact us to discuss the urgent issues that it raises, including the need for rank-and-file workplace safety committees to organise opposition to the policy of mass infection.



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