

# New Zealand government promotes complacency about COVID-19

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Following New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's announcement last week ending mask mandates and most other public health measures, the Labour Party-led government and corporate media are attempting to sow as much complacency as possible about the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

On September 21, Public Health Agency head Dr Andrew Old held what he said would be "the last routine COVID press briefing." As with the recent decision to switch from daily to weekly reporting of COVID deaths, the aim is to reduce public awareness of the pandemic and minimise scrutiny of the government's response.

During the press conference, Dr Old was asked to respond to US President Joe Biden's lying statement to "60 Minutes" that "the pandemic is over." He said Biden was wrong, but added: "He is right in that the pandemic is at its lowest level since early 2020... However, nowhere in the world has completely eliminated COVID-19 and we expect that the pattern of new variants and repeated waves is going to continue for some time."

In fact, COVID deaths and infections are climbing in the US, with 400 people dying from the virus each day. Worldwide, the pandemic has killed an estimated 22 million people, many of whose deaths are not counted in the official figures. The policy of mass infection, adopted by nearly every government, including New Zealand, guarantees that deaths and severe illnesses will continue to rise and the coronavirus will mutate into new, more dangerous and vaccine-evading variants.

In New Zealand, the winter wave of infections and deaths has subsided somewhat since July, when the country had one of the highest per-capita death rates in the world. However, for the week ending September

18, the Ministry of Health reported 74 more people had died within 28 days of a COVID infection, and there were 175 COVID patients in hospital. According to official figures, a total of 1,972 people have died of COVID and a further 357 deaths are classified as unconfirmed.

It is only a matter of time, perhaps just weeks, before cases will again rise sharply due to the removal of public health mandates.

Reporters did not challenge Dr Old's false claim that "nowhere in the world" has eliminated COVID-19. China, the world's most populous country, continues to maintain a largely successful zero-COVID policy, with periodic outbreaks quickly suppressed through the use of temporary lockdowns, mass testing and isolation of positive cases.

New Zealand also succeeded in remaining COVID-free for most of the pandemic, using similar measures, until Ardern announced last October that the government was abandoning its elimination policy. This decision was dictated by the interests of big business, which demanded the full reopening of workplaces and schools and an end to lockdowns.

In a significant admission, Dr Old said during a Newsroom interview published August 12: "there is a real, fundamental and probably irreconcilable difference between the need for certain companies to deliver profits to shareholders and the ideals and aspirations of... public health." He added, "that's just a reality we need to deal with."

The vast majority of New Zealand's 2,000-plus COVID deaths are the result of the Labour government adopting the same criminal policy of profits before lives as the US and other countries. It is estimated that half the population has now been infected.

While the government pretends that the worst of the

pandemic is over, hospitals remain overwhelmed, struggling to cope with hundreds of COVID patients, plus a backlog of thousands of procedures that were delayed due to COVID.

Primary health services are also severely under-resourced. A general practitioner in the Wellington region recently sent patients a letter informing them that “the funding for COVID related consultations has decreased, so there may be a consultation fee applied.” Most people with COVID are now only entitled to funded GP consultations during the first two weeks of their illness, and just one funded COVID-related consultation during weeks two to six.

Thousands of people are suffering from debilitating Long COVID, with very limited access to diagnosis, treatment and support. Scout Barbour-Evans, a 27-year-old single parent with Long COVID, told the *New Zealand Herald*: “My symptoms range from the fatigue and the post-exertion malaise, to being more prone to other infections, to my blood pressure tanking when I stand up,” as well as dizziness.

After struggling alone for months, Barbour-Evans was only able to get medical support after speaking out in the media. “They’ve had 2.5 years to plan for this and it was utterly negligent to let Covid spread without a plan. I’m angry, I’m lonely, and I am too exhausted to be fighting like this,” Barbour-Evans said.

The government also appears to be cutting spending on masks, which are still mandatory in healthcare and aged care settings. An aged care nurse in Wellington told the *World Socialist Web Site* that workers at his facility are no longer being given N95 masks, which provide strong protection against COVID. They are now receiving cheaper and much less effective surgical masks.

COVID has spread like wildfire through many aged care centres. The nurse said eight residents at his facility had died of COVID, and “in the last few months more than 80 percent of our residents and most of the staff got the virus. We can’t prevent it from spreading.”

Some workers have been infected as many as four times, placing additional strain on the already understaffed facility. “Some staff have to work more than 14, 15 hours a day,” under conditions where workers “don’t have as much energy as before, because of post-COVID symptoms. They have

lethargy, and are easily distracted and getting angry. Staff are getting more back pain and injuries.”

The nurse also criticised the removal of mask mandates in supermarkets and other public spaces, and the scaling back of advertising to encourage vaccination. Just over half the population has received a third dose (or booster) of the Pfizer vaccine, which is essential to reduce the risk of severe illness from the Omicron variant. Only 11 percent of people have received a fourth dose (second booster), which is restricted to those aged 65 and over, or who have disabilities or chronic health conditions.

The decision to allow COVID to spread, driven by the need “to deliver profits to shareholders,” poses immense dangers to the health and lives of working people. It also reveals the bankruptcy of capitalism and the urgent need for a socialist movement to put an end to it. The trade unions, which have herded people back to work and back to school, are complicit in the government’s criminal agenda. Workers must therefore take matters into their own hands by building rank-and-file workplace committees to fight for a fully-funded elimination strategy to stop the pandemic and save lives.



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