

Third COVID wave worsens in New Zealand

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On November 16, officials from New Zealand's ministry of health held a press conference on the rising number of cases, deaths and hospitalisations from the country's third wave of COVID-19.

It was the first government press conference dedicated to the pandemic in almost two months. The Labour Party-led government has tried to avoid talking about the worsening crisis, particularly since Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern lifted almost all mask mandates and other public health measures in September and falsely asserted that “the worst of the pandemic is, in many ways, over.”

On November 6, Ardern was asked by a TVNZ interviewer whether she was worried about increasing case numbers. She replied that the “extra wave before Christmas” had been “predicted” by the government, adding falsely that cases “are starting to look like they're peaking and coming away.”

From November 6 to November 17, the seven-day average of reported cases has increased from 2,969 to 3,154. As of November 18, 329 people were in hospital with COVID, up from 305 on November 1.

On Wednesday, Dr Andrew Old, deputy director-general of the ministry's Public Health Agency, revealed new modelling showing daily cases could rise to 11,000 over the summer, fuelled by a “swarm” of more transmissible Omicron sub-variants. Hospitalisations could reach 100 per day and deaths could exceed the previous peak reached in July at the height of the second wave—a time when COVID was New Zealand's leading cause of death and the country's per capita COVID deaths were the highest in the world.

While making these warnings, government officials did not announce the reintroduction of public health measures to stop or even mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. Dr Old advised members of the public to get vaccinated, test if they have symptoms and self-

isolate if they test positive, and take a supply of rapid antigen tests when going on holiday. These individual measures will not prevent thousands more people becoming severely ill and hundreds dying in the coming months.

Official figures show that a total of 2,154 people have died of COVID, but the real toll is far higher. Another 436 deaths are classified as unconfirmed due to lack of data, but occurred shortly after a COVID infection. Another 695 deaths which occurred within 28 days of infection are classified as not the result of COVID, although there is no detail of how this determination was made.

All but 59 of these deaths occurred in 2022; they are the preventable outcome of deliberate and criminal policy decisions. Just over a year ago Ardern announced the end of the previous zero COVID policy, which had kept New Zealand almost entirely free from the virus thanks to the use of temporary lockdowns, border quarantine and strict isolation measures.

The ending of lockdowns, reopening of workplaces and schools, and the removal of quarantine, masking and vaccine mandates, was carried out on the orders of big business. In every country, the financial elite has placed profit ahead of workers' safety and determined that more than 22 million deaths in the past two years is an acceptable cost of doing business.

The “let it rip” agenda could never have been imposed without the assistance of the trade unions, which did nothing to protect workers and worked hand-in-hand with the state and corporations.

It is likely that well over half New Zealand's population has been infected with COVID at least once. Reinfections now account for about 20 percent of reported daily cases. This alarming fact disproves the unscientific claims, repeated by Dr Old and other officials, that New Zealanders may be safer because of so-called “hybrid immunity” from both vaccination and

mass infection. Every new infection can weaken the immune system and make people more susceptible to severe consequences, including Long Covid.

The level of conscious criminality on the part of the government was underscored on November 15 by a *Newsroom* report, which noted that publicly released documents show that in August, Dr Old “recommended the mask mandate remain in place for public transport and other close contact situations but ministers overrode him.”

Dr Old advised the government that “removing mask mandates and quarantine requirements for household contacts at the same time could increase infections and hospitalisations by 50-55 percent in the short-term.” He wrote that “Māori, Pasifika, people with disabilities, and people living in areas of high deprivation are likely to be disproportionately affected if mask mandates were removed and replaced with strong recommendations.”

Epidemiologist Dr Amanda Kvalsvig told *Newsroom* that the removal of masks on public transport was hard to comprehend. She said: “Any policy position that fails to make use of basic protections against Covid-19 spread in the community is knowingly contributing to the already unacceptable health inequities in this country.”

The reason the ruling class opposes mask use is because they are a constant visual reminder that the pandemic is still raging, and that action must be taken to stop transmission.

Every week brings more news of the catastrophic situation in the public health system, which faces a shortage of at least 4,000 nurses and hundreds of doctors and was in crisis even before the pandemic.

Figures released on November 15 show that 594 people spent 24 hours waiting in an emergency department in August, up from 160 in August last year. Long wait times have been implicated in a number of avoidable deaths.

The flood of patients needing urgent attention has led to thousands of non-urgent, but vital, procedures being delayed. The *Bay of Plenty Times* reported on November 5, for example, that the number of patients waiting for surgery at Tauranga Hospital has soared from 12 in October 2017 to 1,940 five years later. One 75-year-old woman was told in May 2020 she needed hip surgery; two-and-a-half years later the operation

has still not been scheduled.

Whangārei Hospital emergency physician Dr Gary Payinda wrote in *Stuff* that the situation in Tauranga was representative of the entire country, following decades of healthcare being starved of resources.

He noted that this situation was connected with a broader crisis of social inequality: “Civil society has eroded, infrastructure has been allowed to degrade, and the middle class hollowed out, while the wealthy have done very, very well... The top two billionaires in New Zealand own more wealth than the bottom 1,500,000 people in our country. To call that obscene and unsustainable is an understatement.”

The healthcare and social disaster inflicted on the population raises the urgent need for working people to take up the political fight against the policy of mass infection and its source: the capitalist system itself, which prioritises profit over human life.

We call on readers to attend the online public meeting called by the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and rank-and-file healthcare workers and educators tomorrow, at 5p.m. New Zealand time (3 p.m. Australian Eastern Daylight Saving Time).

The meeting, titled “Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!” will outline a political perspective, including the building of rank-and-file committees, to unify health workers, teachers and other sections of workers in the fight for decent wages, working conditions and the elimination of COVID-19. Register now: <https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh>



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