

# New Zealand's COVID wave continues as XBB.1.5 variant found

Tom Peters  
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New Zealand's third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic continues, with dozens of deaths and hundreds of people being hospitalised each week due to the virus.

In the week ending January 15, another 57 people were reported to have died within 28 days of contracting the coronavirus, and 333 people were in hospital due to the virus at the end of the week. A total of 19,215 new cases were recorded, but the real toll is undoubtedly far higher. The Labour Party-led government is deliberately limiting testing in order to keep people at work, if they have COVID but no symptoms.

Since Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced an end to New Zealand's elimination strategy in October 2021, and her government proceeded to abandon lockdowns and other public health measures, the country's COVID death toll has shot up from around 30 to more than 3,000. In fact, the health ministry reports that 3,766 people have died within 28 days of contracting COVID, but claims that 699 of these deaths were not COVID-related, providing no further details.

More than 2.1 million infections have been recorded for the whole pandemic, in a population of 5 million, and 25,427 people have been hospitalised for COVID, including over 3,000 children.

With no steps taken to stop or even slow the spread, the toll of illness and death will continue to rise sharply in the coming months. The new Omicron variant XBB.1.5, also known as Kraken, was detected in New Zealand during the first week of January. This variant, the most transmissible and immune-evasive so far, is fuelling a surge in several countries, including the United States where it is estimated to account for over 40 percent of COVID cases.

In the face of this new threat, the government is

promoting maximum complacency. A ministry of health statement on January 9 declared: "The detection of XBB.1.5 is not unexpected." Despite clear evidence of Kraken's heightened transmissibility, it said: "It remains unknown how XBB.1.5 will compete against other variants in a New Zealand context, and whether this could affect the level of COVID-19 circulating in the community in the coming months."

Portraying the mass infection of the population as a positive, the ministry said: "New Zealand currently has a high level of immunity based on high vaccine uptake, combined with a recent wave of infections (so-called 'hybrid immunity')."

This is totally misleading. In fact, more than a third of COVID cases reported in recent weeks are repeat infections. Every time someone gets the virus, it increases the risks that they will become seriously ill and develop long-term conditions, or Long COVID.

Vaccines provide some protection against serious illness but their efficacy is limited. Nearly half the population has still not received a third dose (or first booster) of the vaccine, and only 14 percent have received a fourth dose (second booster), which is needed to remain up-to-date.

In contrast to the government, experts issued blunt warnings about the new variant.

Speaking to NewstalkZB, epidemiologist Michael Baker warned that XBB.1.5 is "better at infecting people and quite likely to cause a new wave of infections." He added: "People often say 'we have to wait and see if it's more severe or less than other sub-variants' ... but actually sub-variants that affect a lot more people is much worse in some ways because it just means a lot more people will get sick, in some cases dying."

Microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles wrote in *Stuff* that the

proliferation of new variants including XBB.1.5 was “really worrying,” adding that “it looks like monoclonal antibody treatments are no longer able to protect immunosuppressed people from some of the Omicron sub-variants.” She expressed concern “that we are no longer working collectively to reduce the spread of Covid.”

On January 8, epidemiologist Amanda Kvalsvig wrote on Twitter: “Unless the NZ Govt changes their Covid strategy in 2023, this is the certainty we now have: of ongoing, cumulative, inequitable damage to population health and wellbeing, including (unforgivably) our children.”

The corporate media, meanwhile, continues to report as little as possible on the pandemic. Writing in the *New Zealand Herald* on January 14, former opposition National Party MP Steven Joyce noted, approvingly, that politicians have “quickly moved on to playing down the virus and normalising it.” News bulletins, he said, are now reporting COVID deaths in “just a thirty-second summary” before the weather report.

Joyce, a former transport minister, complained that the Ardern government didn’t remove public health measures earlier, and that the shutdown of transport projects during lockdowns had “likely cost billions of dollars and years in delays.”

He called for the cost to business to be investigated by the royal commission into the government’s pandemic response. This inquiry, announced by Ardern last month, will start in February and is expected to finish its work in mid-2024.

The commission’s terms of reference say it will investigate “the overall response, including the economic response, identify what we can learn from it and how that can be applied to any future pandemic.” The purpose of the inquiry is to ensure that there is no return to any policy of elimination, or even mitigation measures, which are deemed an unacceptable impost on big business’ profits.

The inquiry will be chaired by University of Melbourne epidemiologist Tony Blakely, a prominent minimiser of COVID-19. When Omicron emerged, Blakely echoed false claims that the variant was “mild” and advocated a policy of mass infection in Australia and New Zealand. In February 2022, he told Radio NZ that New Zealand was being “too cautious,” and urged the Ardern government to work faster at dismantling

public health measures in order to “let Omicron wash through in a timely manner.”

Assisting Blakely with the inquiry are two seasoned representatives of the capitalist state: former National Party education minister Hekia Parata and ex-Treasury secretary John Whitehead.

To fight for a scientific COVID-19 elimination policy that puts lives ahead of corporate profits, workers have to take matters into their own hands. What is required is a political struggle against the Labour government and the whole political establishment, and the building of rank-and-file workplace committees, independent and opposed to the trade unions which have enforced the “let it rip” agenda.

We urge readers to contact us to discuss the way forward, and to participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the Pandemic, which is being conducted by the International Committee of the Fourth International to expose the homicidal policies of governments and elaborate the political strategy for ending the pandemic once and for all.



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