

New Zealand Labour government scraps remaining COVID public health measures

Tom Peters
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On Monday, New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins announced that the government was ending the requirement for people with COVID-19 to isolate at home for seven days, and to wear masks in hospitals and other healthcare settings. Subsidies for COVID-related sick leave have been removed.

These were the last remaining mitigation measures to slow the spread of the potentially deadly and debilitating coronavirus. In late 2021, the Labour Party government ended its zero-COVID policy, which used border quarantine and temporary lockdowns to eliminate the virus from the community.

Schools and businesses were fully reopened and mask and vaccine mandates lifted in 2022, as the government adopted the same homicidal profits-over-lives agenda that has now killed around 25 million people worldwide.

By July 2022 New Zealand was leading the world in per capita weekly COVID-19 infections and deaths. The country's total COVID-19 death toll surged from about 30 in October 2021—among the lowest in the world—to 3,249 according to the Ministry of Health's latest figures.

The real number is probably higher: another 140 deaths are unconfirmed but likely due to COVID. There are 1,385 more people who died within four weeks of testing positive for COVID, but the Ministry asserts that these were not caused by the virus. New Zealand's all-cause mortality increased by 10 percent in 2022, with 3,642 more deaths than 2021.

At a press conference, Hipkins and Health Minister Ayesha Verrall did not hide their enthusiasm for ditching all measures to reduce the spread of COVID, with the prime minister saying he had “longed for this particular day.”

The event was almost like an election rally. With

voting scheduled for October 14, Labour is running a right-wing campaign with pledges to boost spending on the military, tougher law-and-order measures, and now the complete evisceration of COVID-19 protections.

Verrall declared: “While our case numbers will continue to fluctuate, we have not seen the dramatic peaks that characterised COVID-19 rates last year. This, paired with the population's immunity levels, means Cabinet and I am advised we're positioned to safely remove the remaining COVID-19 requirements.”

Hipkins and Verrall did not mention the fact that every week dozens of people are dying from COVID-19 and hospitalisations are rising. Another 29 deaths were added last week and 171 people were in hospital with the virus on Sunday night—up from 116 in hospital two weeks earlier.

They remained silent on the current surge in COVID-19 infections and hospital admissions in the US, Britain and across the northern hemisphere, fuelled in part by the new and even more infectious EG.5 or Eris variant. New Zealand will inevitably be hit by a similar surge.

Notwithstanding Verrall's statements, immunity from vaccination, while it can decrease the severity of COVID cases, is not enough to stop the spread of the virus. Nor does it prevent Long COVID, which can be potentially debilitating. The risk of developing Long COVID, a condition that affects the brain, heart and lungs, increases with every repeat infection.

The government's pretence of being guided by health advice is farcical.

Microbiologist Dr Siouxsie Wiles, a former advisor to the government's pandemic response, wrote on Twitter: “Gutted by today's news that masking in healthcare settings and mandatory isolation are [gone].”

Writing in the *Post*, she pointed out that immuno-

compromised people would be at significant risk from the removal of restrictions. Drawing attention to the danger posed by Eris, Wiles noted: “In the last month, Ireland has seen a five-fold increase in the number of outbreaks in hospitals and nursing and care homes—from five to 30—and a six-fold increase in the number of people in hospital with Covid—from 63 to 378.”

Epidemiologists Nick Wilson and Michael Baker—both former government advisors—also criticised the announcement. Wilson told *Stuff*: “The government is so keen to pretend it’s all over, despite people dying daily in hospital. It’s not trivial.”

Baker pointed out to Radio NZ that COVID “is still, in New Zealand, amongst the infectious diseases, the leading cause of death and hospitalisation.”

Kelvin Ward, the urgent care physician who began a health workers’ petition in March 2020 calling for a lockdown, wrote on Twitter: “I am dumbfounded. How on earth do you expect ‘healthcare workers’ to continue to want to work in an increasingly stressed healthcare system, when your government makes a conscious choice not to limit transmission of an infection that causes death, morbidity and long term disability... which WILL increasingly put more and more stress on the health system.”

Ward added: “This decision shows disdain for the vulnerable and the marginalised. The death of public health and collective responsibility.”

On the other hand, according to *Stuff*, business groups such as the Canterbury Employers’ Chamber of Commerce welcomed the end of self-isolation: “Chamber boss Leann Watson said the leave requirements had added extra cost to business owners and exacerbated workforce pressures.”

As far as the business elite and the government are concerned, people with COVID-19 should be compelled to go to work where they can infect others, otherwise profits will suffer. Last year it was revealed that government officials deliberately sought to reduce COVID testing because positive test results would take people “out of the available workforce.”

The Labour government has always been guided first and foremost by the needs of big business. The initial lockdown in March-April 2020, which reduced cases to zero, was imposed by then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern because the government was afraid of mass

action by thousands of healthcare workers and others demanding a scientific public health response to protect lives. These demands emerged outside of the unions, which opposed lockdowns.

As soon as it was able to, the government began lifting restrictions and forcing workers back to work and children back to school. This could not have been done without the assistance of the trade unions, which act as a police force for the working class and have not lifted a finger to stop the infection of millions of people by COVID-19.

The working class cannot continue to tolerate endless deaths and severe illnesses from COVID-19. New Zealand and other countries, including China and Australia, proved early in the pandemic that COVID can be eliminated. The fight for elimination today, however, requires the mobilisation of the working class, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to contact us to discuss how to form rank-and-file safety committees in schools, hospitals and other workplaces to fight to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The funding needed for a comprehensive, scientific public health response must be obtained from the banks and the business elite, which have made enormous profits during the pandemic.



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