

New Zealand PM contracts COVID during election campaign

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With the New Zealand election less than two weeks away on October 14, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins revealed on social media on Sunday that he had tested positive for COVID-19. It is the second time he has been infected with the coronavirus.

As a result, Labour Party's campaign has been disrupted, with Hipkins going into isolation for five days. A leaders' debate scheduled for tomorrow will likely be postponed or cancelled. It has also broken the conspiracy of silence by the parliamentary parties and corporate media surrounding the COVID pandemic, which has not been discussed in the lead-up to the election except as a thing of the past.

Since prime minister Jacinda Ardern announced the end of New Zealand's Zero COVID policy in late 2021 and the government began removing public health measures, the coronavirus has spread across the country, infecting millions of people again and again. According to the Ministry of Health, more than 3,300 people have died from COVID—certainly an underestimate—and dozens are being added to the death toll each week.

A total of 31,109 people have been hospitalised for COVID, including 3,395 children under the age of 10. As many as 150,000 people could have Long COVID, a debilitating condition affecting multiple organs. The risk of Long COVID increases with multiple infections.

Almost all of these deaths and illnesses could have been prevented if the elimination policy had been maintained. In every country, the ruling class is pursuing an extraordinarily reckless and criminal “let it rip” policy which has led to more than 26 million deaths.

Hipkins wrote on Instagram: “I’m in close contact with New Zealanders on the campaign trail and I don’t

want to pass it on to anyone, so I’ll be following the guidance and isolating for a few days or until I get a negative test.”

In fact, Hipkins may well have already exposed thousands of people to the infection. On Saturday, he campaigned at the Moon Festival in Auckland where, according to the *Post*, “he briefly danced on stage in front of thousands at a Cook Island festival at Trust Arena.” He also made a campaign appearance at the bar, Carmen Jones.

No effort is being made to track down those who were at these events and warn them to get tested. Hipkins and other political candidates have attended hundreds of public meetings, debates and media appearances, with absolutely no precautions taken against the spread of infection. Any of these events could have served as super-spreaders for COVID.

While Hipkins is going into isolation, workers who get COVID are being pressured to keep working. The government has actively discouraged the testing of asymptomatic people in order to prevent people who discover they have COVID calling in sick. In August, Hipkins announced with undisguised glee that the requirement for people to self-isolate for seven days would be scrapped, along with associated COVID leave payments, and that masks were no longer mandatory in public hospitals and other healthcare settings.

At the time, Health Minister Ayesha Verrall blithely declared that while COVID case numbers would “continue to fluctuate,” a temporary decline in reported cases and “the population’s immunity levels” meant it was safe to abandon these last remaining public health measures.

Shortly afterwards, New Zealand’s only dedicated Long COVID clinic, in Christchurch, announced it would have to close due to a lack of state funding.

Accurate reporting of cases no longer exists. The *New Zealand Herald* reports that wastewater testing in the Wellington region “shows the amount of viral material detected is similar to early April” when there were 198 cases being reported a day. But, as of September 24, just 52 cases a day were reported.

Everything has been done to reduce public awareness of the ongoing dangers of COVID and promote the fiction that the pandemic is over. Scientist Joane Hewitt told the newspaper that reporting of test results had declined since the government removed isolation requirements.

The public healthcare system is in a deep crisis. *Stuff* reported in August that as of March there were 7,136 vacancies being advertised for full-time workers in New Zealand hospitals, about 40 percent for nurses. Auckland and Wellington have the worst shortage, with about 1,100 vacancies each.

Hospitals are frequently overwhelmed. On September 26, *Stuff* reported that Whanganui Hospital was frequently at 147 percent capacity, “with overflow patients being treated on beds, wheelchairs and seats in [emergency department] corridors.” An article on September 6 noted that Southland Hospital had just two doctors on duty overnight, looking after 80 patients.

Longer waiting lists for surgical treatment have led to avoidable deaths. According to the *Northern Advocate*, Neill Bainbridge, from Northland, “was diagnosed with cancer on July 4 and died on September 13 without receiving any treatment.” He died on the same day his first appointment with an oncologist was scheduled. His wife Sheryl said: “Because of limited resources in all areas of this country’s defective health system, our family was cheated of extra time with Neill in our lives.”

Understaffing and the soaring cost-of-living have fuelled strikes by tens of thousands of nurses, doctors, laboratory workers and other healthcare workers. So far, the strikes have been kept isolated from each other by the trade union bureaucracy.

Neither the Labour Party nor the opposition National Party, which is expected to lead the next government, has any solutions. Both are pledging to slash billions of dollars in spending on public services, which will inevitably make the healthcare crisis worse. All parties—including Labour’s allies the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori—agree that the population must endure

continual deaths and severe illnesses from COVID-19 with no end in sight.

Only the Socialist Equality Group and the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting for a scientific elimination strategy and an end to the profits-before-lives policies adopted throughout the world.

This requires a socialist political perspective: the working class must be mobilised to demand a vast expansion of resources for public healthcare to put an end to the pandemic and save lives. This fight must be undertaken on an international scale since COVID-19 cannot be eliminated in a single country while it is allowed to spread unchecked everywhere else.

We call on those seeking a way forward to read and share the SEG’s election statement, and attend our public meeting in Wellington on October 4, which will be conducted with HEPA filters, masks and Far-UV technology for a COVID-safe environment.



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