

New surge in New Zealand COVID-19 cases and deaths

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25 November 2023

In line with a global surge in COVID-19 cases, powered by the emergence of new variants, New Zealand's pandemic tragedy is again escalating. Reported case numbers across the country increased more than 32 percent last week, according to data released by Te Whatu Ora Health NZ.

Four years into the global pandemic, cases are again exploding in one country after another. The resumption of wastewater analysis in the United States indicates cases have climbed by 28 percent over the past month, heading into winter. In Australia, experts have warned of millions of looming cases as an eighth wave hits, with Omicron subvariants EG.5 (Eris) and BA.2.86 (Pirola) circulating nationwide.

Data on the current surge in New Zealand is based on wastewater tests, case counts and deaths. Director of Public Health Dr Nick Jones said: "These waves are likely due to people's immunity waning, and the introduction of new hybrid variants which increase the community's susceptibility."

In the seven days to midnight on November 19, 7,881 COVID-19 cases were reported—up from 5,947 the previous week: an increase of 32.5 percent. The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases was 1,124, compared to 849 a week prior. The real numbers are undoubtedly much higher, given that many people have stopped reporting positive tests.

Hospitalisations have increased significantly. At midnight last Sunday, 349 people were in hospital with COVID-19, up from 284 the same time a week earlier. Working class areas in Auckland, the country's biggest city, are the hardest hit. The Waitemata district (north and west Auckland) reported the highest number of cases (1,171), followed by Counties Manukau (south and east Auckland), with 1,060 cases.

To date, officials have attributed a total of 3,522

deaths to COVID-19, which is likely an understatement. In a further 176 deaths among people who had the virus, the cause is unconfirmed. There are an additional 1,520 deaths recorded among people with COVID, where the cause has been listed as "not COVID," without any further details.

All but 30 of these deaths occurred after then Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the abandonment of the COVID-19 elimination policy in late 2021 and adopted the criminal "let it rip" policy that has now killed more than 27.4 million people globally.

On August 14, Ardern's successor, Chris Hipkins, announced the "formal end" of the remaining public health measures: a seven-day isolation requirement for people infected with COVID and mandatory masking in health facilities.

Business groups, who had lobbied strenuously against any measures impacting on private profits, welcomed the decision. Public health experts, however, questioned the rationale. Professor Nick Wilson from the University of Otago bluntly said the government was wrong to end isolation requirements. "The government is so keen to pretend it's all over, despite people dying daily in hospital. It's not trivial," he said.

Microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles, one of the scientific experts who had fronted the initially successful elimination response, told the *Post*: "We should keep what little protections we have until better vaccines are available and we've upgraded our ventilation standards to get the virus out of the air... These protections will help keep future Covid waves to a minimum."

Wiles is currently suing her employer, Auckland University, over what she claims was its failure to protect her from widespread and vicious threats by anti-vaxxers. Wiles told the court she was asked by her

managers to limit her science communications to one day a week and that employment law required her to step back if the “situation” was unsafe. Wiles interpreted this as a “threat” by the university to stop her from functioning as critic and conscience—a role academics carry out as part of their wider social responsibility.

Big business, the government and the corporatist trade unions are all suppressing warnings about COVID amid an escalating assault on the social, economic and health conditions of the working class. There is scant information on the current surge in the corporate media.

The incoming National Party coalition government, which includes the far-right ACT and NZ First parties, opposes any ongoing measures to protect public health. As early as February 2022, National Party leader and now prime minister Christopher Luxon demanded “a pathway out of ever more restrictions, rules and controls which are driving so much hurt and anger.” Luxon falsely claimed that “COVID is now manageable for the vast bulk of people at home,” while vaccination and boosters “are protecting our hospital system.”

NZ First leader Winston Peters has courted COVID-19 deniers and opponents of vaccination associated with the Voices for Freedom group, which led an occupation of the lawn outside parliament for three weeks in early 2022.

Writing in *Stuff* on April 15, David Seymour, leader of the “libertarian” big business mouthpiece ACT, denounced the “saga of the mandatory isolation” requirements as “bad decisions made on bad advice.” ACT advocates greater privatisation of healthcare services as a means to cut costs and open up new opportunities for profit-making.

Health experts and COVID sufferers are meanwhile warning about the increasingly dire personal and social consequences of Long COVID. The Long COVID Registry, an authoritative research project in New Zealand, into what is described as a “mass disabling event,” has just been released to the publication *Newsroom*.

The project found that between 6 and 10 percent of those who get COVID-19, thousands of people, end up with symptoms that persist beyond the period of acute illness. These range from minor symptoms which eventually go away, to symptoms that are “grievous

and chronic.”

Newsroom notes that the findings, and testimonies collected by the researchers, make for grim reading. “The testimonies are reminiscent of obituaries, albeit written by the person who has died. Long Covid patients describe their lives in the past tense, because the lives they used to have are now gone,” it states. Health related quality of life scores for sufferers were in many cases on a par with those reported by people with multiple sclerosis. Globally, hundreds of millions of people are now believed to be suffering from symptomatic Long COVID.

Scientists, including epidemiologist Michael Baker, are calling for New Zealand to establish a dedicated centre for disease control (CDC) to better prepare for future pandemics and take responsibility for surveillance, co-ordinated laboratory testing, outbreak response, workforce training, and strategic capacity building.

Any serious proposal to strengthen the public health system is anathema to the political establishment. Successive governments have severely run down the healthcare system, which is understaffed and overcrowded, prompting repeated strikes by doctors, nurses, laboratory staff and other healthcare workers.

The WSWS recently noted that the reality of the pandemic “has been deliberately covered up, minimized and distorted by every capitalist government and corporate media outlet in the world, who have instead promoted disinformation to lull the population into believing that COVID-19 is now harmless and the pandemic is over.” In New Zealand as elsewhere, the response of the capitalist ruling class amounts to a massive and unprecedented social crime.



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