

New Zealand in COVID surge as government plans new attacks on public health

Tom Peters**8 January 2024**

Another 44 deaths with COVID-19 were added to New Zealand's toll over the last week, amid a surge of infections over the summer holiday period. The number of people in hospital with COVID-19 more than doubled in three months, from 141 on October 5 to a high point of 401 on December 21, and fell to 355 on January 7. The December peak was the highest number of hospitalisations recorded since January 2023.

Despite the dangerous rise, fuelled by the abandonment of public health measures and highly infectious new COVID variants, the Ministry of Health paused its regular weekly reporting of deaths and other data for three weeks between December 18 and January 8.

The 44 deaths reported yesterday have still not been officially confirmed as *from* COVID-19. Radio NZ reported, falsely, "There were no deaths this week as a result of the virus." In fact, the Ministry of Health website states that nine of these deaths were not COVID-related, and for the remaining 35 the cause is not yet determined.

During November and December, around 20 to 30 people died each week of COVID-19. The country's total deaths with COVID stands at 5,513, almost all of which happened after the then-Labour Party government ended its elimination strategy in late 2021, allowing the coronavirus to spread everywhere.

The Ministry of Health asserts that 1,596 of these deaths were not caused by COVID, and that 272 had an unknown cause. Its official death toll is thus reported as 3,645. Even this smaller figure, which likely understates the real toll, makes COVID New Zealand's most deadly infectious disease, killing about 1,800 people a year—more than twice as many as those killed by influenza.

Moreover, COVID-19 has resulted in tens of

thousands of hospitalisations and perhaps hundreds of thousands of people with long-term debilitating illnesses, or Long COVID. This can include severe and potentially life-threatening heart, brain and respiratory problems.

The current surge is fuelled by the highly infectious and immune-resistant JN.1 variant, which has become dominant internationally. On December 23, the US had already reached the second-highest level of viral transmission of the entire pandemic, according to wastewater data.

Experts voiced concern about the situation in New Zealand in comments published by the Science Media Centre (SMC) on December 18. University of Canterbury scientist Professor Michael Plank said the latest wastewater data showed 10-15 percent of infections in NZ were due to JN.1. He warned that "we are yet to feel its full impact" and predicted a rise in cases in the new year.

Professor Nikki Turner, director of the Immunisation Advisory Centre at the University of Auckland, stated: "There is an enormous amount of COVID around at the moment.... With Christmas and New Year approaching, everyone is mixing more and going on holiday around the country, so we need to focus on who is at high risk of severe disease and how we can protect them this summer." She warned people to stay away from others if symptomatic, and to wear masks in crowded areas.

Dr Anna Brooks, a Long COVID researcher at Auckland University, said: "The risk of developing Long COVID should be front and center as we continue to face waves of infection as variants evolve. Alarmingly, the risks are instead more often downplayed, despite the substantial and growing body of evidence that each infection, regardless of vaccine or infection history, carries a risk of on-going health

harms, including but not limited to Long COVID.”

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told the SMC: “This wave is larger than the fourth wave early in 2023 suggesting that the pandemic threat is continuing to evolve in unpredictable ways.” He said this should be “a wake-up call for the NZ Government about the importance of a vigorous national strategy and program to protect us from Covid-19 and other serious respiratory infections. This program should include an updated Covid-19 vaccine, support for self-isolation, and a communication plan to maintain awareness about how to stay safe.”

The government and political establishment are ignoring these warnings. All mask mandates were scrapped by the previous Labour government, including in hospitals and aged care facilities. Labour ended self-isolation requirements last August, marking the end of all COVID related public health measures.

The impact of these decisions on public hospitals, drastically understaffed and overcrowded even before the pandemic, has been disastrous. On December 21, the *New Zealand Herald* reported that the emergency department at Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland was overwhelmed, with occupancy at 90 to 100 percent. “There were many drivers, but part of the rise in presentations was a relatively high rate of respiratory cases,” the report said.

Taup? Hospital experienced a doubling of demand during the Christmas period and a regional Health NZ spokesperson told the *Herald* on January 2 that this was partly due to COVID-19.

The ruling elite’s criminal policy of mass infection and death is deepening under the National Party-led coalition government formed in November. The government will stop providing free rapid antigen tests (RATs) and facemasks at the end of February, which will further accelerate the spread of COVID, particularly among the most vulnerable people in society.

As part of sweeping austerity measures targeting public services, the government is also considering cutting funding for free COVID-19 vaccines and antiviral treatments. Health Minister Shane Reti told the *New Zealand Herald*, “The funding for both is due to come to an end at June 30, 2024, and remains under consideration.”

According to the Ministry of Health, only 55.8

percent of people aged over 50 have received a second booster, which is essential to minimise the risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Public information campaigns encouraging vaccination have all but disappeared, politicians avoid mentioning the virus and, along with most of the media, behave as though the pandemic is over.

The repudiation of the most basic principles of public health by every government in the world is a damning indictment of capitalism. The corporate and financial elite deems any measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 an intolerable drain on its ability to extract profits from the working class. As a result of the “let it rip” agenda imposed in every country, more than 27 million people have died, according to the *Economist*’s estimated toll.

The trade unions also stand exposed. In New Zealand, as elsewhere, they provided a vital service to the capitalist elite by enforcing the reopening of unsafe schools and workplaces, facilitating the spread of COVID and thousands of avoidable deaths.

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International—supported by the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand—continues to fight for a global elimination strategy to put an end to the pandemic. This strategy must be adopted by the working class, in opposition to the corporatist trade unions and the political establishment. To fight for an end to incessant waves of infection, debilitating disease and death, workers will have to take matters into their own hands, through the building of rank-and-file workplace committees. We call on workers to contact us to discuss the way forward in this life-and-death political struggle.



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