

Measles outbreak in New Zealand

Chris Ross, Tom Peters
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On November 9 an individual in the city of Nelson, New Zealand, was diagnosed with measles, the 18th case identified in an outbreak affecting different parts of the country, including Auckland, Wellington, Manawatu and Taranaki. Thousands of people have been potentially exposed to the virus.

While 17 previous cases—mostly confirmed in October—are no longer infectious, the most recent case had no known links to any of them, indicating that the highly contagious and potentially deadly virus is spreading undetected. Health NZ warned: “New Zealand continues to remain at high risk from measles.”

Measles is preventable through vaccination, but New Zealand’s vaccination rate has fallen over recent years. The re-emergence of the disease in developed countries around the world is an indictment of capitalist governments, which are dismantling public health systems and promoting anti-vaccination charlatans such as US Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

In the United States, over 1,281 confirmed cases of measles were reported in July, the highest number in three decades, with cases in at least 38 states.

Radio NZ (RNZ) reported on October 22 that “only about 80 percent of New Zealanders have immunity against measles—much lower than the 95 percent needed to prevent a widespread outbreak.” After the National Party government belatedly appealed for people to vaccinate their children, the percentage of children under 2 years old who had received the vaccine increased to 82.6 percent, as of November 11, up from 75.1 percent a year ago.

Vaccination is lowest in Māori and Pacific Island communities, which are among the poorest sections of the working class.

In late 2019, under the previous Labour Party-led coalition government of Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand

experienced a severe measles outbreak, with 2,194 reported cases, 35 percent of which required hospitalisation. The worst complications involved encephalitis (brain inflammation), pregnant women losing their babies and life-saving treatment for children.

At that time, according to the Ministry of Health, immunisation coverage for children less than 24 months old was 91 percent, with unvaccinated populations concentrated in working class areas like South Auckland. The outbreak spread from New Zealand to the impoverished Pacific country of Samoa, which had a largely unvaccinated population who had been targeted by a disinformation campaign led by Kennedy and other anti-vaccination campaigners.

There were 5,700 cases in Samoa, 1,800 hospital admissions and 83 deaths, most of them children.

Following the 2019 outbreak the Labour-led government allowed measles vaccination rates to plummet from 91 to 84.4 percent for under-two-year-olds by 2021. While the Ardern government initially implemented strict lockdowns and an elimination strategy for COVID-19, measles preparedness was criminally neglected.

In late 2021, the government caved to the demands of big business for an end to the “zero-COVID” policy. Labour, with the crucial collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy, imposed the same disastrous “let it rip” policy that had already led to millions of deaths worldwide. Thousands of people died in 2022 and 2023, as under-staffed hospitals were overwhelmed by COVID patients.

Sections of the political establishment, including the far-right ACT Party and especially NZ First—which was part of the Labour-led coalition from 2017–2020—openly stoked anti-vaccine sentiments. NZ First leader Winston Peters visited an anti-vaccination protest encampment on the lawn of parliament in early

2022. Both parties are now playing a major role in the National-led government.

Health Minister Simeon Brown announced on November 3 that 117,000 measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccines were available and 28,000 in production—an amount that is insufficient to address the crisis caused by under-vaccination. Tairāwhiti Medical Officer of Health Dr Oz Mansoor told RNZ that more than 500,000 New Zealanders were likely susceptible to measles.

The outbreak has included “high-risk exposure events,” including one infectious person who travelled on a ferry between the North and South Islands on October 3, potentially exposing hundreds of people.

There were cases reported at Auckland Grammar School and two Wellington secondary schools, Wellington Girls College and Wellington College.

Wellington Girls’ College principal Julia Davidson told RNZ on November 3 that she had asked Health NZ whether a student prize-giving event should proceed despite a confirmed case of measles. The event was permitted by the government agency. A student was later found to have attended the event while symptomatic.

The school then identified about 900 close contacts of the student with measles, and asked students in years 9, 10 and 11 to stay home. Davidson said: “we’re ignoring [Health NZ’s] advice at the moment by keeping people home for three days... We have staff who have babies under one, people who have family members who are compromised, health wise.” The school cancelled all planned events except exams.

The Director-General of Health Audrey Sonerson sent a letter to health and education leaders on October 31 that “students should continue to attend school regardless of their vaccination status” if “there has not been a case of measles discovered at a school.” If a case arose, school rolls would be compared with immunisation records and students without two MMR doses would be asked to stay home.

The government’s top priority is to avoid any disruption to the economy and profits. Speaking to RNZ, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon sought to shift responsibility for the public health crisis onto individuals: “In a first world country, we shouldn’t be having measles outbreaks. We shouldn’t be having schools shut down. But we need parents to do their

part, which is to get their kids vaccinated.”

This is the same government which continues to allow COVID-19 to run rampant, with tests increasingly hard to find, mask mandates and other mitigations scrapped, and public health information about vaccines and other preventive measures virtually non-existent.

In total, 5,475 people are reported to have died from COVID since the pandemic began, including four deaths in the week ending November 9. More than 47,000 people have been admitted to hospital with the virus.

The same utterly negligent approach has been taken with measles, despite repeated warnings from experts about the low vaccination rate. Modelling by the New Zealand Institute for Public Health and Forensic Science has warned that as many as 150 people a week could get infected with measles if an epidemic takes hold.

Since the pandemic, the public health system has been further starved of funding, by both Labour and National governments, in order to cut taxes for the rich and to transfer billions of dollars to the military.

Immunisation Advisory Centre senior adviser Mamaeroa David told RNZ on October 25 that hospital and general practice staffing shortages contributed to the “perfect storm... My biggest concern is we’re going to start actually losing children to measles this round.”

Tens of thousands of nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers, as well as teachers, took part in a mass strike on October 23—the largest strike in New Zealand since 1979—to oppose the government’s efforts to slash their wages and its refusal to address the staffing crisis in public hospitals. The union leaders are currently in talks with the government in an attempt to impose sellout agreements and prevent future strikes.



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