

Growing COVID-19 hospitalisations in New Zealand

Tom Peters
20 June 2024

A sixth wave of COVID-19, accompanied by other illnesses, including influenza and RSV, is placing immense pressure on New Zealand's run-down public health system. Last Sunday, there were 279 people in hospital with COVID-19, which is about double the numbers recorded during March and April.

Last week, 37 recent deaths were confirmed to be COVID-related, including one person aged in their twenties, bringing New Zealand's total official COVID death toll since the pandemic began to 4,120. This is certainly an underestimate.

The Ministry of Health says another 1,907 people have died within 28 days of testing positive for COVID, but has claimed that these deaths were "not related" to the coronavirus. In the case of another 245 deaths, it is not confirmed whether COVID played a role.

Of the 4,788 cases reported last week, about two-thirds were repeat infections. This increases the likelihood of developing Long COVID, which can severely impact the brain, lungs, heart and other organs. The real case numbers are undoubtedly far higher; testing and reporting are no longer officially encouraged.

The pandemic, which has killed more than 27 million people worldwide, continues to exact a devastating toll because of deliberate policies adopted by capitalist governments that have placed corporate profit interests ahead of lives.

New Zealand's former Labour Party-led government of Jacinda Ardern ended its COVID elimination policy in October 2021 and removed all public health measures over the next year, ensuring the mass infection of the population. As well as causing thousands of deaths, this criminal policy has led to 40,816 hospitalisations for COVID-19.

The current surge is being fuelled by new variants particularly those known as KP.2 and KP.3, which are even more infectious than the JN.1 variant that was responsible for the previous wave earlier this year. Scientists have repeatedly warned that allowing the coronavirus to circulate would produce more immune-resistant strains, but these warnings have been ignored by governments.

In an attempt to cope with the influx of COVID patients, Wellington Regional Hospital recently reopened its dedicated COVID-19 ward from May 31 to June 11. It had been closed three years earlier. On June 14, Nelson Hospital reported that seven patients were being forced to wait in the emergency department, due to a surge in occupancy and a lack of beds.

Healthcare workers in Dunedin told the *Otago Daily Times* on June 11 that the overcrowding in the city's emergency department meant that patients were being forced to wait in ambulances, potentially putting them at risk.

Public health experts continue to issue warnings calling on the public to wear masks and to remain at home and test if sick. Epidemiologist Michael Baker told Newshub on Tuesday: "The last three waves have been getting bigger, more cases, and... we're quite complacent about this virus now, but we shouldn't be." He warned that COVID was the country's most deadly infectious disease and "people of all ages are getting long-term effects—Long COVID."

The government, however, has stopped virtually all public health messaging. There is no longer any requirement for people who test positive for COVID to self-isolate. At the end of June, rapid antigen tests will no longer be available for free anywhere. In another cost-cutting measure, the National Party-led government has scrapped free general practice

consultations for people who are eligible to receive antiviral medication for COVID (the elderly and immunocompromised).

Despite the political establishment's efforts to persuade the population to ignore COVID, it continues to cause major disruption to everyday life. *Stuff* reported on June 6: "Figures from the Ministry of Education showed estimated total teacher sick leave days nationwide increased to 401,832 in 2023, from 299,734 in 2018." There have been several reports of school closures or partial closures due to staff illness since winter began.

The crisis in the health system is compounded by a shortage of thousands of nurses and doctors and intensified austerity measures. According to Council of Trade Unions economist Craig Renney, in the 2024/2025 budget announced last month, "Per capita operational expenditure on health fell by 1.3%, and real per capita expenditure (i.e., adjusted for inflation) fell by 4.5% on current population projections."

Healthcare and other services are being starved while the government cuts taxes for the rich and diverts billions of dollars to expand the prison system, the police, and the military in preparation for war.

Healthcare workers have repeatedly taken strike action in an attempt to fight back. But these strikes are being kept isolated by the trade union bureaucracy, which is preventing any real fight against the healthcare crisis and government austerity.

This includes the education unions, which enforced the full reopening of schools and workplaces in 2022 and the removal of masking and other measures to reduce the spread of COVID. The pandemic provided further proof that the unions are not workers' organisations, but adjuncts of big business and the state, whose job is to protect corporate profits.

The public health measures taken in New Zealand, China and Australia early in the pandemic—when governments feared that letting the coronavirus spread would spark an uncontrollable rebellion in the working class—demonstrated that COVID-19 can be eliminated from the community. If implemented on a global scale, scientific policies—including quarantine, mass masking, social distancing and, where necessary, lockdowns—could have saved millions of lives.

The corporate and financial elite, however, opposed such measures as an unacceptable drain on profits and

pushed for an end to the "Zero COVID" policies in New Zealand and elsewhere. The ruling class has shown its utter indifference to workers' lives, both in its criminal response to the pandemic as well as its support for the genocide in Gaza and the reckless escalation of the war in Ukraine.

This is why, as the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board has explained, the struggle against the pandemic—no less than the struggle against war and climate change—"is a political and revolutionary question which requires a socialist solution." It requires the building of an international socialist movement which will lead the working class in the fight to reorganise society on the basis of human need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)