

New Zealand workers speak out on unsafe conditions, wage cuts

By Tom Peters
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Workers in New Zealand remain deeply concerned about being exposed to the potentially deadly COVID-19 coronavirus. The Labour Party-led government's four-week shutdown of schools and non-essential businesses began on March 26 in an attempt to stop the virus from spreading.

So far, New Zealand has confirmed 797 cases of the virus, with one death. The numbers are rising each day. Most cases relate to international travel, but many originated within New Zealand.

Despite Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's claim that her government has acted faster than other countries, there has been nowhere near enough testing to know the extent of contagion. Just over 26,000 tests have been conducted.

This week, the government finally widened the criteria so anyone with symptoms can be tested regardless of whether they have a history of travel. This will still not identify people who are infected but have no symptoms.

There are many reports of vulnerable workers being placed at risk. On March 28, *Stuff* reported on workers at a New World supermarket in the affluent Wellington suburb of Thorndon, near Parliament. They were sent an email telling them if they stayed home they would be placed on leave without pay, even if they had health problems.

A similar message was sent to workers in a Christchurch supermarket. "The email was signed off with the hashtag #bekind," *Stuff* noted.

Stan, a resident of Levin, north of Wellington, told the *World Socialist Web Site* he and his wife were concerned as they share a house with a supermarket worker. "My wife has diabetes and fibromyalgia, which makes her more vulnerable to COVID-19." The supermarket worker "has to be careful because he

might pass it on," he explained.

"It's only been less than a week of the lockdown and frontline workers are getting stressed out and overwhelmed already," Stan said. He added that "without mass testing, treatment and isolation, the quarantine will have limited long-term effect. Why haven't they been stockpiling tests since November? Why aren't they testing all staff in essential services?"

The WSWWS spoke with a kitchen worker from a South Island public hospital, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid any negative repercussions.

She said the company she worked for had provided hand sanitiser and gloves but no face masks. Workers were informed about a two-metre social distancing rule, but this was not being enforced. "Protocols are very vague," she said.

The worker had long-standing health problems but struggled to get approved time off with pay. "I know that I'm at risk because it's stated on the COVID-19 government website that people with high blood pressure shouldn't be working. I take blood pressure medication because I have hypertension and I regularly see my doctor about my heart problems."

The worker had been hospitalised for a life-threatening condition during her pregnancy two years ago. "So I went to work on Thursday, Friday, Saturday knowing that I'm at risk. It didn't sit well with me."

The worker then rang the Ministry of Health who told her "you're right, high blood pressure is a risk." After multiple phone calls and discussions with doctors and her employer, the worker succeeded in getting time off work, but her medical certificate still did not specify she was at "high-risk." "Why is it so hard to admit that I am at risk and I am eligible for the wage subsidy?" she asked.

The lack of face masks for workers preparing hospital food is particularly concerning. The government has repeatedly stated that it has millions of masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) available, and is procuring more from overseas. But hospital workers, disability carers and others have reported shortages. An online petition demanding higher-quality PPE for doctors and nurses has more than 16,000 signatures.

Another petition last week calling for the shutdown of the meat processing industry over unsafe conditions gained over 2,600 signatures. The *Otago Daily Times* reported on March 31 that a worker at Silver Fern Farms' Finegand processing factory said there were no masks and workers were "told to be two metres away from others but that's just really unrealistic in [this] type of work."

"If we walk off the job, we won't get the subsidy, and if we stay at work, we risk getting COVID-19," the worker said. The Meat Workers Union is working closely with businesses to keep the factories in operation.

While the government is giving billions of dollars to businesses, thousands of workers have been sacked. Others have been forced to stay home during the lockdown on reduced pay. Companies affected by the pandemic can get a "wage subsidy" from the government but are not obliged to pay full wages, compelling many people to seek welfare payments.

A Taupo resident, whose husband had taken a pay cut from his restaurant job, told the WSWS it was too hard to get assistance. "They need to make it easier to get food grants while this is happening. Phones [are] overloaded with the Ministry of Social Development," she said. "What about all those people who don't have the internet or phone? There are still people who are poor enough that can't afford these so-called necessities."

Fletcher Building, New Zealand's largest construction company, today announced a 20 percent wage cut for 9,000 employees during the four-week lockdown. Should the lockdown be extended, it will cut wages by 50 percent for the next four weeks, and 70 percent after that.

The WSWS has seen a letter sent to workers at Downer Group announcing a 20 percent wage cut. It declared, "we have to make some sacrifices now" to avoid redundancies. The wage reduction would last at

least four weeks and could be "extended up to 12 weeks." The construction and engineering company, which operates primarily in Australia and New Zealand and employs 53,000 people, made an underlying profit of \$340.1 million in 2019.

The letter said Downer had been "working closely" with four trade unions which "are supportive of us working to retain as many jobs as possible." The E Tu union released a brief statement on March 31 saying members at Downer were "free to accept this offer to ensure your income continues at 80 percent," even though the union did not believe the company's process was lawful. The statement has since been removed from the union's website.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>