

What is behind the New Zealand health minister's resignation?

By Tom Peters
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David Clark announced his resignation as health minister on July 2, following weeks of escalating media criticism of his role in New Zealand's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The resignation appears contradictory: New Zealand's Labour Party-led coalition government has been hailed in the media internationally for its response to the pandemic, which is presented as a model for other countries. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern last month declared the country free from community transmission of COVID-19 and the government lifted all social distancing restrictions. Clark has claimed the country is "the envy of the world."

The reality, however, is that New Zealand's health system is severely run-down due to decades of austerity, leaving the country highly vulnerable should there be new outbreaks of coronavirus.

Clark's resignation follows serious bumbles at hotels serving as quarantine facilities for people returning from overseas. Healthcare officials admitted on June 24 that 51 people had been allowed to leave quarantine earlier than the mandated two-week period, without being tested for the virus.

Mismanagement of quarantine hotels has contributed to a resurgence of coronavirus in Melbourne, Australia, and there are well-founded fears that a similar outbreak could occur in New Zealand. The Ardern government reacted to the breaches by placing the quarantine hotels, currently housing around 5,000 people, under military control.

Clark was widely denounced in the media after he denied responsibility for the debacle and sought to place the blame entirely on the director-general of health, Dr Ashley Bloomfield.

The health minister had previously offered to resign in April after going on a bike ride in breach of the

country's lockdown rules. Ardern decided to retain Clark, arguing it would be too disruptive to dismiss him in the middle of the pandemic.

The prime minister changed her position last week. Clark told a media conference he was stepping down because "my continuation in the role is distracting from the government's overall response to COVID-19." There is no obvious replacement for Clark and Education Minister Chris Hipkins has temporarily taken on the health portfolio.

The government's immediate goal was to scapegoat Clark for the quarantine failures, ahead of the Labour Party's conference last weekend where Ardern launched her campaign for re-election. The minister's hasty removal, however, points to deeper instability within the government and the wider political establishment.

The ruling class is undoubtedly concerned about rising class tensions and opposition to the entire political establishment, particularly among young people. Last month tens of thousands of New Zealanders protested against police violence, in solidarity with the movement sparked by the murder of George Floyd in the US.

The Labour Party recently polled at 50 percent, down from 59 percent in May. Its support could quickly evaporate if there is a resurgence of COVID-19. Significantly, Bloomfield indicated on July 1 that if there are new outbreaks, the government will implement localised lockdowns, similar to the largely inadequate measures imposed in parts of Australia. Big business opposes any return to a full nationwide lockdown.

Opposition National Party leader Todd Muller has described the government as "shambolic" and said Ardern should have sacked Clark earlier. National,

however, is in turmoil following a leadership May.

The party's former deputy leader Paula Bennett has announced she intends to resign from politics. National MP Hamish Walker was stripped of his portfolios this week after he admitted to leaking private information about the whereabouts of COVID-19 patients in an attempt to embarrass the government.

Labour and National are both widely reviled as parties of big business. Labour received just 36.9 percent of the votes in 2017 and was only able to form a government with the support of the Greens and the right-wing nationalist NZ First.

Workers and young people are shifting further to the left of all these parties under the impact of the pandemic and the economic crisis. Tens of thousands of people have been made redundant and unemployment has risen from 4 to over 7 percent.

The government appears to have concluded that Clark is incapable of dealing with the struggles that will inevitably erupt in the health sector. He is deeply despised among healthcare workers for his role in enforcing austerity over the past two years.

In 2018, more than 30,000 hospital nurses and healthcare assistants went on strike against an effective pay freeze and gross understaffing. The next year, thousands of doctors, midwives, ambulance paramedics and other healthcare workers also took industrial action.

In response to the nurses' strike, Clark claimed that the government could not afford to immediately fix the crisis in the healthcare system. The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) played the critical role in pushing through a sellout deal, despite widespread opposition from its members.

Further inroads are being made in the midst of the pandemic. On June 24, St John Ambulance, which provides ambulance services for most of the country, announced it was considering up to 100 job cuts due to a funding shortfall.

Health workers are seeking a way to fight back. More than 3,400 general practice nurses, administrators and receptionists are preparing to strike for two hours on July 23. The nurses are seeking pay parity with hospital nurses, who can receive around \$7,700 more per year with the same level of experience.

The Ardern government, like every government in

the world has responded to the pandemic by handing billions of dollars over to the financial markets and big business. Corporations which have received bailouts and subsidies are ruthlessly restructuring through mass layoffs, wage cuts and attacks on working conditions.

The government is also spending billions on upgrading the military in order to integrate it into US and Australian war preparations against China.

The next government, whoever leads it, will be confronted with increasingly explosive class struggles against war and social inequality.

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