

# Growing anger over New Zealand mine deaths

**Tom Peters****26 November 2010**

Following the second massive explosion on Wednesday at the Pike River Coal mine on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island, mining experts, relatives and friends of the 29 dead miners have condemned the company's unsafe practices and its failure to carry out a rescue operation. The miners were declared dead on Wednesday afternoon.

It now appears that the most likely cause of the disaster was a power outage that disabled the mines' ventilation system. Since the mine extracts coal from close to the Hawera fault line, which releases very high levels of methane into the surrounding atmosphere, conditions would have rapidly become extremely dangerous.

The first explosion, the product of a build-up of methane gas, swept through the mine's tunnels last Friday. In the days that followed, there was no contact with the trapped miners, and rescue coordinators repeatedly stated that the levels of explosive gas made it too dangerous for anyone to enter the mine.

The most damning indictment of the Pike River operation has been made by Andrew Watson, the operations manager of the United Kingdom Mines Rescue Operations. Publicly condemning the mines' safety standards, he told today's *New Zealand Herald* that methane levels had to have reached 5 to 15 percent of the atmosphere for an explosion to occur. In Britain, he pointed out, work stopped in mines once methane levels reached just 1.25 percent, and they were evacuated once they reached 2 percent.

Watson told the newspaper: "So, either the warning system was inadequate, or it was not sufficiently monitored. I've been in mines rescue for 32 years and I've never seen a disaster of this level. The eyes of the world will be on this investigation."

International Mines Rescue Body secretary Alex Gryska told the *Herald*: "Having incidents like this in developing countries is one thing. Having it happen in western countries is uncommon."

The reality of the Pike River disaster, however, is that miners in New Zealand were working under conditions that differ little from those in countries like China, where more than 2,000 miners lose their lives every year. There was no back-up power generation; there was no adequate monitoring of gas levels; there were no

plans in place for rescue teams to respond quickly to an emergency; and there were no back-up supplies of oxygen, food and water to ensure trapped miners could survive a protracted rescue operation.

Anger erupted at a meeting on Wednesday afternoon when Pike River CEO Peter Whittall told families about the second explosion, which eliminated all hope of rescuing their husbands, partners, sons, fathers, brothers and friends alive. Lawrie Drew, father of 21-year-old trapped miner Zen Drew, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that "people got up and started yelling abuse, saying 'you had the window of opportunity five days ago, why didn't you take it?'"

According to mining experts, the safest time for rescuers to enter the mine would have been immediately after the first explosion. David Cliff from the University of Queensland told Radio New Zealand that the window of opportunity could last "an hour or a couple of hours", after which methane levels would have once again built up to explosive levels. John Brady, another expert who has reviewed 20 fatal mine incidents in Australia, told the *New Zealand Herald* that a rescue operation could only have been mounted within the first four hours after the explosion. Even then, he added, there was still the risk of another explosion immediately afterwards.

Rescue coordinators have denied that a "window of opportunity" existed after the Pike River mine explosion. Their denials may well be related to the fact that if such a window had existed, it would have been missed anyway, because rescuers did not arrive at the site until hours after the blast.

While no one has clarified the exact timeline of events following the explosion, the explosion apparently took place at 3.30pm on Friday November 19 and the alarm was reportedly raised at 3:50pm by electrician Russell Smith, who had been sent to investigate the power outage. Management were not made aware of what had happened until around 4.10pm, and Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee told the ABC yesterday that it would have taken around two hours for emergency crews to reach the remote mine site.

The mine apparently had no effective procedures to respond to

such an emergency. It seems unlikely that anyone was present at the mine site at the time of the first explosion, apart from the workers who were more than two kilometres inside the tunnel. The blast itself was captured by a security camera just outside the tunnel entrance, but this evidently did not trigger any alarm.

Pike River Coal has given no explanation for its decision to withhold CCTV footage, which shows a cloud of coal dust blasting out of the mine entry for 52 seconds, from families and the media until Tuesday. It appears that the company did not wish to make the families immediately aware of the overwhelming impact of the explosion. Most experts agree that the initial blast would probably have killed the miners straight away, but for days the company insisted there was a possibility that they could walk out alive. Lawrie Drew told the media that families were angry that “the truth wasn’t told from the beginning.”

Rescue coordinators repeatedly insisted that methane levels, and the risk of further explosions, were too high for anyone to enter the mine. Their assertions simply underscore the dangers inherent in mining so close to the Hawera fault line—dangers that placed the lives of the miners at risk every time they entered the mine. As Drew also pointed out after the second explosion on Wednesday, the mine “should never have been opened in the first place”.

There is mounting evidence that the company sacrificed its workers’ safety and ultimately, their lives, in order to continue extracting the mine’s immensely profitable supply of coking coal. Either the build-up of methane in the mine was not detected prior to the explosion or, if it was detected, workers were sent into the mine for their shift regardless.

Russell Joynson, a cousin of Australian miner Willy Joynson who died in the explosion, told the *Australian* that the tragedy would not have happened if the mine had been properly equipped to monitor methane levels.

Former Pike River employee Brent Forrester, whose close friend Ricki Keane was among those killed in the explosion, told today’s *Timaru Herald* that “management struggled to maintain the methane levels, and safety concerns he and his crew raised were often ignored.” He said the mine “always had ventilation issues” and his gas detector would frequently go “off the charts”. The paper reported that “he said many of the methane sensors did not work or were not calibrated and the mine’s phone system needed to be upgraded”. Forrester explained that “the reason I didn’t push it too far [with management] was the fear of losing my job. The pressure is always on, they’re losing a lot of money, so they’re making you cut a lot of short-cuts”.

Pike River Coal began shipments of coal to India this year after facing numerous setbacks and delays in the mine’s construction. The company lost \$NZ54.1 million from July 2006 to June 2010, and was under pressure from its major shareholder, New Zealand Oil & Gas, to improve its performance.

Coking coal is used in the production of steel and is in especially high demand in the expanding markets of India and China. The company is already indicating that it wants to re-open the mine. Pike River CEO Peter Whittall told the New Zealand Press Association yesterday that there were still “50-million-odd tonnes of coal” in the mine. Pike’s coal pricing for the December quarter of 2010 had been benchmarked at \$US205 per tonne.

In an extraordinary self-indictment of his company’s indifference toward the dangers of mining in Pike River and similar areas, Whittall declared: “There is no reason this or any other mine cannot be safe.” He told journalists that the company was ready to “go back” into production as soon as it could find a workforce “who understand the risks and understand the industry”.

New Zealand’s political establishment has refused to pose any serious questions about the lack of safety at the Pike River mine. The National Party government has announced there will be a commission of inquiry into the disaster, but workers should have no confidence in this exercise. Not a single politician has called for any corporate leaders to be held responsible for the deaths of the 29 miners. Instead, the National government, the opposition Labour Party and the Green Party have all heaped praise on CEO Whittall for his “leadership” in the disaster.

Government members have already declared that the mine should be reopened, regardless of the findings of any investigation. West Coast-Tasman MP Chris Auchinvolle bluntly told the *New Zealand Herald*: “The coal seam is still there. Coal is extremely valuable and the Pike River mine is a \$300 million-plus investment.”

Labour Party leader Phil Goff told Radio New Zealand on Wednesday that a 2008 report into mine safety by the Department of Labour had “rightfully described the mining industry as a hazardous workplace with the potential for catastrophic incidents”. The report had recommended several changes including the re-introduction of safety check inspectors. Goff admitted, however, that the Clark Labour government, in office at the time, had not acted on the report, adding “frankly right now is not the time to concentrate on that.”



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