WSWS and ISSE public meeting in New Zealand

Political lessons of the Pike River mine disaster

6 December 2010

The Pike River tragedy, which saw 29 miners declared dead on November 24th after being trapped in the mine for five days, was no random or isolated incident. It was a crime against the miners and the working class as a whole. From the foreseeable and preventable methane explosions, to the failed rescue operation and the drawn-out saga engulfing the retrieval of the bodies, the disaster constitutes yet another grim indictment of the private profit system.

From the mine's very inception, the company's board and management were more concerned with production and profit than workers' lives. The miners were working under conditions that differ little from those in countries like China, where thousands are killed in mines every year. At Pike River there was no back-up power generation, no adequate monitoring of gas levels, no plans in place for rescue teams to respond quickly to an emergency and no supplies of oxygen, food and water to ensure trapped miners could survive a protracted rescue operation.

Ultimately, these conditions were the outcome of the privatisation and free-market policies pursued relentlessly by both National and Labour Party governments since the 1980s. They include the removal of worker-elected safety inspectors at mine sites, as far back as 1992. Between 1985 and 1994 New Zealand had a ratio of 51 deaths per 100,000 workers in the mining industry—more than double the rate in the US industry. The unions have been entirely complicit in this process —a fact underscored by Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union secretary Andrew Little when he told reporters in the days after the explosion that he had no problem with safety in the mine.

Pike River is New Zealand's first major privately-owned coal mine producing coal for the burgeoning Asian steel industry. Like other mining companies around the world, Pike sacrificed workers' safety and cut costs in order to compete for global markets. New Zealand has now joined the international litany of mine disasters over the past year—including the explosion that killed 29 miners at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine in the US—which have claimed the lives of more than 12,000 fatalities worldwide.

Working people can have no faith in the royal commission set up by the Key government. It is destined to be a monumental whitewash. Its purpose is not to establish the truth about the disaster, but to put on a show of "learning the lessons" so that the way can be cleared for the industry to "move on"—allowing the unrelenting pursuit of profits to resume.

The working class must advance its own response, against the agenda of New Zealand's corporate and financial elite. All those responsible for the deaths at Pike River should face criminal charges, while all the mine's workers—both casual and permanent—should be guaranteed their previous earnings throughout the term of the various inquiries, and alternative decent, safe, full time jobs once they are concluded.

Moreover, the entire mining industry must be fundamentally restructured to guarantee the health and safety of its workers, provide good jobs at decent wages, and utilise the most up-to-date technology to organise production in the most socially responsible manner. None of this will be carried out so long as mining is driven by the class interests of a narrow, wealthy corporate elite and the insatiable profit demands of the money markets.

Miners and workers throughout the country must turn to the development of a mass independent movement of

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the working class that will unify all sections in the fight to defend their most fundamental interests on the basis of the program of socialist internationalism. This requires, above all, the fight to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, in New Zealand, and its student organisation, the International Students for Social Equality. All workers, youth and students are invited to attend the meeting to discuss these vital questions.

Meeting details:

Thursday 16th December,
6.00 p.m.
Victoria University of Wellington,
Old Government Buildings,
(opposite Wellington Railway Station)
Seminar room GBG07 (Ground floor)

Ticket $4 and $2 concession

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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