

New Zealand: Former Pike River Coal miner hits out at lack of mine safety

Tom Peters
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Three weeks after a massive methane gas explosion tore through the Pike River Coal mine on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island, the bodies of 29 men killed in the disaster are still trapped underground. Recovery workers are using a jet-propelled GAG (Gorniczny Agregat Gasniczy) machine to pump carbon dioxide into the mine in an effort to suppress a raging fire. Temperatures inside yesterday reached 600 degrees Celsius, and it could be weeks before it is safe to enter. Police have begun collecting DNA samples from family members of the 29 miners, which could be used to identify any remains that are eventually recovered.

Pike River Coal continues to insist that the mine was operated safely and to imply that the series of explosions, which began on November 19, was simply a random occurrence. Since the disaster, however, several mine experts, former miners and family members of those killed have spoken out about the unsafe conditions at the mine, including faulty ventilators, no back-up power generation system, inadequate methane drainage systems and no adequate monitoring of gas levels. Moreover, there were no plans in place to respond rapidly to an emergency; after the first explosion it took hours for emergency crews to reach the site.

Former Pike River employee Brent Forrester told TVNZ's "Sunday" program on December 5 that the explosion "was totally preventable". In an extensive interview, he said he was "very angry [and] upset" about the disaster, which had killed his close friend, contract worker Ricki Keane, and left "a lot of families, a lot of kids without dads". Forrester explained that he was speaking out because Keane would have done the same. "In these days and times mines don't blow up under professional guidance," he said, adding that there

was "bad ventilation" and frequent gas build-ups at the mine.

Forrester rejected claims by Pike River Coal that the mine's methane gas levels were low. He noted that one of the dead miners, Conrad Adams, had sent text messages to a friend saying that "they were working in very low ventilation, he could smell hydrogen sulfide and the methane was going through the roof. It's the same thing as I was experiencing a year ago."

Forrester said the company had not installed methane sensors "anywhere up near the face where we were mining. If we had a gas problem and it [methane gas] was in the explosive range, the control wouldn't even read that probably [until] 15, 20 minutes later. Often sensors weren't calibrated or they'd shut down and you just couldn't get them calibrated back in time."

He said the mine's fresh air base, a ventilated area where workers can shelter in the event of a gas build-up, was "1.5 kilometres from where we were working", and there was "no sufficient first aid gear". Forrester said he once helped organise a walkout of about 10 miners, including Ricki Keane, to protest the lack of basic emergency equipment, including stretchers and an emergency transport vehicle.

Forrester said workers were afraid to raise questions about safety because "there was pressure to get coal out and we were all, I suppose, in a little bit of fear of losing our jobs." He said that when workers reported safety concerns "it didn't seem like anything ever really got done about it", and there was "very much an 'us and them' relationship between management and workers".

Pike River had invested \$NZ300 million in the mine and was heavily in debt to its shareholders. It only began shipping coal to India this year—about 18 months behind its original planned schedule—and had raised just

\$9 million. Forrester's comments are further evidence that the company compromised the safety of its workforce in order to extract the highly profitable coking coal as fast as possible.

Pike River CEO Peter Whittall brushed aside Forrester's criticisms, telling TVNZ: "Gas had always been a hazard in this mine ... and nearly all the mines I've worked in." The position of the company, in other words, is that miners must accept the risk of injury or death as an unavoidable part of the job.

The interview with Forrester also exposes the role played by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which nominally represents about 70 of Pike River's miners. Forrester explained that before organising the walkout he had telephoned an EPMU official and informed him of the workers' safety concerns. But following the explosion on November 19, EPMU national secretary Andrew Little told the *New Zealand Herald* that there was "nothing unusual about Pike River or this mine that we've been particularly concerned about." The union itself had not organised any industrial action at the mine.

Speaking to Radio New Zealand on Monday, Little made no mention of the mounting evidence that the mine was unsafe. Instead, he insisted that people should await the findings of the National Party government's Royal Commission of Inquiry before drawing any conclusions about the disaster: "We just don't know the facts. The possibilities are that there was management failure, there's the possibility that somebody underground had failed in some respect. There's the possibility that there were natural forces beyond anybody's control, but we just don't know."

Workers should have no confidence in the government's Royal Commission, or in the investigations currently being undertaken by the police and the Department of Labour. From the outset, the government, the opposition Labour Party and the Greens—as well as the corporate media—have defended Pike River Coal and praised Whittall for his "leadership" during the failed rescue operation. Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee told Radio New Zealand last week that Pike River had "extensive" safety procedures and to suggest otherwise was "absurd". He said the Department of Labour had never raised any concerns about the mine.

Meanwhile, the fate of around 180 Pike River

workers and contractors remains uncertain. The company has only agreed to pay its own staff until the end of the month, and has already laid off contractors. Pike River has vowed to reopen the mine—before the Royal Commission completes its investigation—but it is unlikely to be able to do so for several months. The company has already announced that it plans to reduce its workforce.

Some business analysts are predicting that Pike River will go into receivership. The company is insured for up to \$NZ100 million, but *BusinessDay* reported that "market sources" estimated it would need at least \$200 million to reopen the mine. The collapse of Pike River would devastate the remote West Coast, but even if the mine reopens it will undoubtedly come under even greater pressure to cut costs at the expense of workers' conditions and safety.

The wife of one West Coast miner articulated the dilemma forced on families in the region, telling Radio New Zealand: "I desperately didn't want him to go down [in the mine] and I still don't really ... but there's not a huge amount of options around here for work."

Amid the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression, mining companies in advanced capitalist countries such as New Zealand are imposing conditions that differ little from those in rival Chinese mines, where more than 2,000 miners lose their lives each year. On Tuesday, a gas explosion killed 26 coal miners in China's Henan Province. The state-owned mine had been operating at night despite an order to halt production, according to a report in China's *Global Times*.



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