

WSWS/ISSE meeting discusses New Zealand mine disaster

Our correspondents
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The *World Socialist Web Site* and Victoria University International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) held a public meeting in Wellington on December 16 on the lessons of the disaster at the Pike River coal mine on the South Island of New Zealand.

The 29 miners were declared dead after an explosion on November 24 shut down any chance of a rescue attempt. The men had been trapped deep within the mine since a methane explosion five days earlier. A raging fire at the mine has only recently been extinguished, and the retrieval of the bodies has been forecast to take months.

The meeting was called to discuss the culpability of the company in the tragic events and to examine the broader political and economic circumstances behind them. The audience was made up of workers, students, retirees and welfare beneficiaries.

Opening the meeting, WSWS correspondent Tom Peters said the unfolding tragedy constituted a devastating indictment of the company's safety procedures and of the profit system itself. In the latest development, Pike River Coal had gone into receivership and laid off almost its entire workforce, with 100 contractors and 114 employees losing their jobs. Contractors had been left with nothing, while more than half the Pike River employees were not entitled to any redundancy payouts.

Peters said that working people should reject the suggestion—put forward by the company, the government and opposition parties and the media—that this was somehow a natural or unavoidable disaster. “There is now a substantial amount of evidence showing that the company sacrificed its workers' safety, and ultimately their lives, in order to extract the highly profitable coking coal as quickly as possible, without interruption or the expense involved in installing adequate safety and emergency equipment,” he declared.

Peters reviewed commentary by workers and mine safety experts that disproved claims by management, government spokesmen and the media that the mine had been built to “exact safety and environmental standards”. He pointed out the company had attempted to conceal and manipulate

evidence. Footage captured on a CCTV camera was withheld from families and the media for five days in an apparent attempt to cover up the size of the explosion.

Peters examined some of the statements made by numerous international mining experts and by workers who had denounced safety conditions at Pike River. They demonstrated that the company had no power back-up for its mine ventilation system, that there was no pre-drainage system for methane, there was inadequate monitoring, and that the miners were working in methane levels which should have led to their evacuation.

Both Labour and National governments had viciously attacked workers' conditions in the mining industry over decades and effectively allowed mines like Pike River to self-regulate their safety standards. Peters indicted the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union for insisting that there was “nothing unusual” about Pike River. The union itself had never organised any industrial action at the mine over safety, even after one incident where the workers themselves walked out, Peters noted.

Peters concluded by insisting that nobody should place any confidence in the government's royal commission of inquiry. The government had not once called for any corporate leaders to be held responsible for the disaster. National, Labour, the Greens and other parties had all heaped praise on CEO Peter Whittall and the government had insisted the mine be reopened so that the \$4 billion worth of coal could be extracted. Whatever the outcome of the inquiry, it would not reverse the trend towards increased exploitation of workers in every industry.

The main speaker, John Braddock emphasised that the disaster could not be understood as simply a New Zealand question, but that it arose from profound objective global developments. He said that mining was a world-wide industry in which thousands died every year. Braddock reviewed the many mining tragedies that had struck in 2010 in the US, Chile, Turkey, China and Russia. Objectively, he noted, “coal miners in New Zealand, as elsewhere, are all part of an industry that operates according to international

benchmarks and prices. Companies backed by governments and trade unions are in a constant battle to maintain their competitive edge by pushing up productivity and cutting costs at the expense of their workforce.”

Pike River was the first major private mine in New Zealand specifically developed to supply the world market, in particular the burgeoning Asian steel industry. It was the flag-bearer for the privatisation and global marketing of the coal industry, and had been set-up to break the dominance of the state-owned enterprise, Solid Energy, as well as to open the way for mining in the environmentally protected national park areas. Before a shovel of coal had been dug, it had become the best performer on the stock exchange, listing as one of the country’s 50 largest corporations with a market capitalisation of NZ\$400 million.

The conditions of severe exploitation under which the company set out to reap its profits, Braddock explained, were bound up with the processes of globalisation, which required the dismantling of all nationally-based labour regulations that had been won in struggle by the working class over the previous historical period.

The speaker described how the expansion of global capital had also become the basis for the ever-widening gulf between a tiny wealthy elite and the vast mass of the working population. The development of financialisation had, through the massive growth of credit and speculation, brought the capitalist system as a whole to its worst crisis since the 1930s depression.

The onset of the recession had accelerated the attacks on jobs and living standards as the financial and corporate elites, abetted by governments around the world, sought to make working people pay for the trillions of dollars handed over to the banks and financial institutions. The drive to re-divide the world amid cut-throat competition for raw materials and markets was rapidly exacerbating international tensions amid the ongoing neo-imperialist catastrophes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Braddock emphasised that like the capitalist breakdown of 1914, which ushered in an epoch of revolutionary struggles, the current crisis was the harbinger of class struggles, which were international in scope and revolutionary in essence. “None of the pressing problems that the working class confronts—conditions of work and safety, the economic crisis, mass unemployment and poverty, the danger of world war and new imperialist crimes, attacks on democratic rights and the threat of dictatorship—can be resolved within the framework of capitalism. The primary lesson of Pike River is that these are literally life and death questions for the international working class.”

Braddock said that workers throughout the country must turn to the development of a mass independent movement of

the working class that would unify all sections in the fight to defend their fundamental interests on the basis of the program of socialist internationalism. “The WSWS and ISSE and its fraternal parties internationally represent the only political force that fights on a unified global basis for such a program.” He invited those attending to study the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and to seriously consider joining and building a section of the ICFI in New Zealand.

After the addresses, there was a wide-ranging discussion covering issues concerning Pike River and the wider economic and political situation. Audience members expressed considerable doubt that the forthcoming government inquiry would uncover the truth. Other questions included the role of the media, the WikiLeaks affair and the nature of the international financial bailouts.

Following the meeting, several young people who attended spoke with members of the ISSE. **Toby** said the meeting was “very good”. He had found it “intelligent and articulate” and had been impressed by the array of facts presented. He had been following the Pike River developments closely, and had been particularly struck by the fact that the victims’ families had not been allowed to speak at the government-organised memorial service. Toby said he didn’t like the system of capitalism and thought socialism would be a “better alternative”.

Jessie, a Year 12 high school student, and **Georgina**, a student at Victoria University, expressed surprise that both the Labour Party and the Greens had joined the government in defending the company. They went on to ask about the nature of the Russian Revolution, the source of Stalin’s terror and the perspective of Trotskyism. Both expressed interest in attending future meetings and in joining the ISSE club at the university.



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