Remembrance service held for New Zealand miners

Tom Peters
4 December 2010

A remembrance service was held Thursday for the 29 miners killed in an explosion at New Zealand's Pike River Coal mine on November 19. The men's bodies remain trapped inside the mine, which has been rocked by four more explosions since, caused by methane gas. Recovery workers are using a jet-propelled GAG (Gorniczy Agregat Gasniczy) machine to pump carbon dioxide and water vapour into the mine in order to suppress a raging fire and reduce the amount of methane in the air. Leaders of the effort say it will be weeks before the mine is safe to enter, and forensic teams and dental specialists may be required to identify the miners' remains.

Thursday's service, organised by the National Party government, was held at the Omoto Racecourse near the town of Greymouth, on the remote West Coast of the South Island, near the mine site. Around 11,000 people attended, including several hundred relatives of the miners. People across the country watched the service on television and paused for two minutes of silence at 2pm to honour the dead workers.

The event lasted over an hour and included prayers, songs by local schoolchildren, a poetry reading, and the singing of New Zealand's national anthem. Each of the 29 miners' families had decorated a table with photos and personal items belonging to their husband, partner, father, grandfather brother or son.

The large audience at the service, many of whom had travelled long distances to be there, was a sign of the immense solidarity felt by ordinary working people with the grieving families. The government, however, ensured that the proceedings were a tightly stage-managed affair. The entire political establishment—assisted by its mouthpieces in the media—is seeking to contain growing anger over the unsafe working conditions at the mine, which almost certainly led to the 29 deaths.

Speeches were delivered by Governor-General Anand Satyanand, Prime Minister John Key, and Pike River Coal CEO Peter Whittall—but none of the miners' relatives, friends or workmates was given the opportunity to speak. Over the past fortnight many of them, along with former Pike River employees and international mining experts, have raised serious concerns that the company compromised safety in the interests of profit.

The Pike River mine is located on the Hawera fault, well known to contain coal that is dangerously high in methane gas. During Thursday's service, Greymouth Mayor Tony Kokshoorn listed previous mine explosions in the area: the Brunner mine disaster in 1896, which claimed the lives of 65 men, the 1926 Dobson mine explosion, which killed nine, and the Strongman mine disaster in 1967, when 19 died. All are thought to have been caused by methane gas.

Pike River had 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.

Referring to the efforts to recover the miners' bodies, CEO Whittall told the service on Thursday: "We are fighting to win the battle with science, with courage, with tenacity and with sheer bloody determination." He omitted any mention of the company's failure to utilise the large body of "science" available that could well have prevented the tragedy.

© World Socialist Web Site

That Whittall, whose company's safety record is being investigated by police and the Labour Department, was provided with a platform at the gathering is in keeping with the government's defence of Pike River since the first explosion took place. Not one politician has called for Whittall, or any other corporate leader, to be held responsible for safety infringements.

Satyanand, Key and Whittall all invoked "national unity" in order to divert attention from the company's responsibility for the disaster. Key referred only in passing to the Royal Commission of Inquiry, which he said would find out what "went so tragically wrong" at the mine "and what can we do to prevent such a disaster ever happening again". Rather than discussing what caused the deaths of the 29 miners, Key devoted much of his speech to "personal" reflections on growing up without a father. He told the grieving families that the loss of a parent was "a terrible thing to happen", but assured them that fatherless children could still "live happy, worthwhile and fulfilling lives".

Even as investigations begin into its safety practices, Pike River Coal is continuing to insist that its mine must be re-opened. Whittall told TV3 on Thursday that there was $NZ4 billion ($US3.06 billion) worth of coal that could still be extracted. The government supports the company's plan. Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee told TVNZ on Thursday that the mine had had a "very good effect ... on the local community".

Tensions between the company and its workers, however, are increasing. More than 100 Pike River employees face an uncertain future, as the company has only committed to paying them until the end of the year. Contract workers have already been laid off.

Pike River is attempting to cover up its safety violations by intimidating mine workers who are being interviewed by police and Department of Labour investigators. Andrew Little, national secretary of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), told Radio New Zealand yesterday that the company had insisted that its lawyers be present during the interviews, which began on Wednesday. Little said that when workers had refused to let company lawyers attend, the lawyers approached them afterwards and "badgered" them about what was said. He also said the company was trying to encourage miners to attend a "briefing" before being interviewed, but so far none had taken up the offer.

Pike River Chairman John Dow denied that workers were being pressured to have a company lawyer present. He revealed, however, that Pike had previously asked police to provide the company with videotapes of the interviews. The request was not granted due to a union objection.

The Pike River Coal disaster is no random or isolated incident. Rather, it is the outcome of privatisation and free-market policies that have been pursued relentlessly by both National and Labour Party governments since the 1980s. These have included the removal of worker-elected safety inspectors at mine sites, as far back as 1992. According to figures cited in the *New Zealand Herald*, between 1985 and 1994 New Zealand had a ratio of 51 deaths per 100,000 workers in the mining industry—more than double the 21.7 per 100,000 in the US.

Pike River is New Zealand's only major privately-owned mine supplying coal to the burgeoning Asian market. It was effectively allowed to determine its own safety standards, and workers who raised concerns were simply ignored. The EPMU was entirely complicit in this—a fact underscored by Andrew Little himself, when he told reporters in the days after the explosion that he had no problem with safety in the mine.

Like other mining companies around the world, Pike sacrificed workers' safety and cut costs in order to compete for access to expanding Asian markets. Last month's explosion was part of an international wave of mine disasters—including the explosion that killed 29 miners at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine in the US. Last year there were more than 12,000 recorded mine fatalities worldwide.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site