

New Zealand mine recovery attempts abandoned

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New Zealand police commissioner Howard Broad announced on Thursday that efforts to recover the remains of 29 miners killed in the Pike River coal mine in a series of explosions last November are to be abandoned. Rescue staff have been battling for nearly two months to stabilise dangerous gases and temperatures following the disaster.

Broad told a media conference that he had “little confidence” that the bodies of the miners would ever be recovered. While it was technically possible, it was impractical and unsafe. “Frankly, my confidence in terms of a recovery operation to bring the men out is quite low,” Broad said. “The assessment is that the likelihood of getting into the mine safely is unrealistic.”

According to Broad, Australian and New Zealand experts agreed with this estimation. Responsibility for securing the mine would be handed back to the receivers, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and it was up to them whether to try to recover the bodies when the mine eventually settled, or “put a fence around it and walk away.”

The announcement enables the conservative National government, and the entire political establishment, to wash its hands of the disaster. Prime Minister John Key declined to be interviewed, but asserted that everything that could be done to recover the men had been done. In a subsequent statement he declared there was “little or no chance” of the bodies being recovered in the near future and the mine would be sealed. Opposition Labour leader Phil Goff described the decision as a “huge setback”, but, since it was made on safety grounds, would have to be accepted. “If it was simply about cost there would be far more questions asked,” Goff lamely declared.

From the start there have been questions, raised particularly by the international media, about why the police and not mine recovery experts had been put in charge of the operation. Distraught family members noted that Key had made promises around the time of the government’s stage-managed memorial service that the bodies would be retrieved, “no matter what” it took. While Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee had endorsed the decision to pass the matter

over to the receivers, a Pricewaterhouse spokesman told Radio NZ its role was to deal with the bankrupt company’s financial situation, not make decisions about a recovery.

The families had earlier stressed they were focused on retrieving their loved ones’ bodies. Bernie Monk, father of deceased mine contractor Michael Monk, and spokesman for the Pike River Families Committee, said the families just wanted to recover the bodies. “We just want closure ... we want to get our loved ones back. I speak on behalf of all the families when I say that,” Monk told the *Press*. He opposed any move to call off the operation, saying workers had told him a number of the recent problems that had plagued it had been overcome, and progress was now being made.

The grim, drawn-out debacle underscores the criminal character of the entire Pike River project. Responsibility rests with the company, which was under-prepared, ill-equipped and poorly managed from the start, and with governments of all stripes that systematically removed health and safety protections for workers, over the past two decades, in order to allow the industry to become “self regulating” in response to free-market demands.

Despite the deployment of imported specialist equipment and recovery teams during the Christmas period, temperatures and methane gas levels inside the mine continued to fluctuate at high levels, thwarting all attempts to enter the mine. A jet-propelled GAG (Gorniczy Agregat Gasniczy) machine imported from Queensland was used to pump carbon dioxide in an effort to neutralise the methane and suppress a coal fire. A Floxal machine, also from Australia, pumped additional water and nitrogen into the mine.

Recent efforts to stabilise the situation involved the use of Rocsil foam to create a seal around a bore-hole near the ventilation shaft in order to prevent oxygen from entering and to allow the GAG and Floxal machines to operate more efficiently. However, when workers were preparing to start pumping the sealant into the cracks on Tuesday, conditions again deteriorated, requiring the hillside to be evacuated.

Even before Thursday’s announcement, sections of the

media had begun clamouring for the recovery to be brought to a close and the tragedy swept to one side. A blunt editorial in the *Dominion Post* on January 12 asserted that it was time to declare the recovery “a lost cause” and demanded that the government act to have the mine sealed. Central to the newspaper’s considerations was the \$10,000 per hour cost of operating the GAG machine. “Callous as it might sound,” it concluded, the country’s “precarious economic position” meant “the taxpayer” could not continue to fund a recovery effort “that the mine’s owner can’t afford to finance and that has no hope of success”.

The editorial emphasised that any decisions over the long-term future of the mine should not affect the company’s commercial options. Pike River’s intentions to re-open the mine at some point—“because its coal is valuable to the company, its shareholders and its customers”—was a “commercial decision” which should be left in the hands of the company, the newspaper declared.

In fact, the roots of the disaster flow directly from “commercial decisions” made by the Pike River company to undertake the highly dangerous mining operation. From the very start, the mine was a risky undertaking, made worse by the company’s contemptuous attitude to safety, working conditions and anything else that would represent a claim against the profits it expected to reap supplying coal to the burgeoning Asian steel industry.

The West Coast community, which depended on the mine for much of its economy, has been plunged further into crisis since the company was placed in receivership by the board on December 13. Almost the entire workforce—around 100 contractors and 114 employees—have lost their jobs. Contractors have been left with nothing, while more than half the Pike River employees have no entitlement to any redundancy payouts, because they had worked at the mine for less than a year.

Moreover, the receivership has thrown into doubt all undertakings the company had made about payments to existing workers and compensation to the deceased workers’ families. One of the laid off miners, Mike Goudie, told the *Press* that he and others were angry with the company: “We’ve lost our mates, we’ve lost our jobs. It feels like we’ve been thrown over one barbed wire to the next,” he said. To allay rising fears, Grey District Mayor Tony Kokshoorn issued a statement confirming that more than \$NZ7 million collected in public donations would not end up with the receivers.

Some 50 redundant Pike River Coal miners have now accepted positions in Australian pits after several mining companies travelled to NZ’s West Coast offering to assist the miners with full migration, while others have agreed to fly workers back home at the end of each 15-day shift.

Michael Flanagan, who took up the latter option, said the offer was “too good to refuse”. Kokshoorn said he was “not surprised” so many have accepted jobs overseas. “Like all of us, they have to put bread and butter on the table and if the only way they can do that is by working in Australia, good on them,” he said.

The miners have only taken these jobs, however, because of the abject failure of the unions to conduct any struggle to defend their jobs, entitlements and basic rights. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had 71 members at Pike River and continues to vigorously defend the company’s safety record, has facilitated job replacements as a means of diverting pressure away from both the company and the government. EPMU delegate Jed O’Connell said the union had negotiated for other local employers to take on about a dozen former Pike River staff, and “the only other option” was relocation to Waikato, where Solid Energy had a number of positions available at its Huntly Mine.

Meanwhile, there is mounting concern that the government’s Royal Commission of Inquiry into the disaster, which is yet to open, will not uncover the truth. A commission spokesman was forced to declare last week that while no final decisions had been made, it was planning for the “majority” of hearings to be held in Greymouth on the West Coast. The statement came in response to calls by the Pike River Families Committee for the entire inquiry to be held there rather than in Christchurch, situated on the opposite side of the South Island.

Charlie Monk said: “We are concerned. We desperately want it here ... Some of the families—who have lost their main breadwinners—how can they be involved in the inquiry if they don’t have it on the Coast?”

Monk said he knew of families who wanted to attend the inquiry every day and travelling to Christchurch simply wasn’t practical—financially or emotionally. The families’ legal representation would also want to discuss matters with the families as the inquiry proceeded, he said.

Monk said the families were determined to learn more about the blasts and were investigating the causes themselves. The committee, along with its legal team, was already interviewing people connected with the mine. “We are going right back to square one. We are interviewing anyone involved with the mine because we are trying to get to the truth,” he declared.



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