

Further evidence of lack of safety at New Zealand mine

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Families of the 29 miners killed in methane gas explosions at the Pike River coal mine last November have denounced successive New Zealand governments after further revelations of appalling safety standards.

Prime Minister John Key admitted to the *Australian* on June 21 that the mine, which was designed as a single-entry uphill shaft with no alternative escape route, would have been illegal in Australia. Last year, Key had declared there was “no reason to believe” that New Zealand safety standards were any weaker than in Australia.

The death of 29 men in the South Island West Coast mine has been falsely presented by the entire New Zealand political establishment, the media and the trade unions as simply an unfortunate “incident”—a hazard of working in a dangerous industry.

Key’s admission of safety defects came just a fortnight before his government’s Royal Commission of Inquiry is due to start its substantive hearings. Key quickly reversed his comments, claiming that he had only been referring to different standards for “mine construction”, not the operational standards in place at Pike River.

Carol Rose, mother of dead miner Stuart Mudge, told Radio NZ that Key’s statements showed successive governments were “clueless” over mine safety. She also condemned the dismantling of a safety inspectorate system, which could have helped prevent the disaster. “They actually dismantled the very system that was there to protect those workers and that was just to save a few measly bucks.”

A Department of Labour review showed that the number of qualified mines inspectors has dramatically declined over the past decade. There was only one safety inspector operating in the entire South Island at the time of the Pike River explosion.

Bernie Monk, a spokesman for a number of Pike River miners’ families, called for improved mine construction and safety standards, and more rigorous inspections. “We’ve got to make sure these mining companies don’t put profits before safety,” he said.

Other revelations have surfaced about the lack of safety standards. An Australian miner, Peter Sattler, who worked as a production supervisor at Pike River, quit four months before the blast over concerns it was too dangerous. He told TVNZ’s “Sunday” program two weeks ago that safety at the mine was grossly deficient.

Sattler said miners had continued to work when methane gas levels exceeded the official “get out” threshold of 2 percent and there was no “tube bundling” gas measurement system, which would have been required in Australian coal mines.

“It was like Australian mining from the 1960s,” he said. “They are four decades behind in mine safety.” Sattler said he had complained to management but was told: “You’re not in Australia, you’re in New Zealand. Do as the Romans do.”

Sattler said some problems were specific to Pike River, but others reflected lax mine regulation across New Zealand. A Labour Department safety audit released last month found that two of the country’s four underground coal mines did not meet health and safety laws, with one needing a gas monitoring system.

Independent contractors revealed last week that Pike River management took 51 minutes to contact emergency services following the first explosion and initially had no idea how many miners were underground. Pike River had also failed to quickly inform miners’ families. Some had not been contacted until the next day.

Contractors' spokesman Gerry Morris said: "We have found a lot of information that is extremely disturbing." He said the Mines Rescue Service was denied entry to the mine—a decision made during a management conference call to Wellington. This was despite the fact that the company thought there might have been as many as 36 men trapped underground. "Their records were completely inadequate and no respect was paid to the history of the mine. It's just staggering," he concluded.

The most perfidious role, however, has been played by the unions. The NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU) issued not a single challenging question or criticism of the company for five months following the deaths. No action was called over the ongoing safety failures within the industry.

Finally, amid growing public disquiet and deepening frustration by the miners' families over the stonewalling by the government and receivers preventing the retrieval of the miners' bodies, CTU president Helen Kelly changed tack. She used the occasion of her May Day speech to declare that "Pike failed in its fundamental duty to provide a safe workplace." According to Kelly, regardless of any findings from the official inquiry, the company's shareholders will have "walked away scot-free, leaving debts and death and accountability behind them as they move on to the next venture."

Kelly's speech was designed to deflect attention from the governments and the union bureaucracy that presided over deteriorating safety standards. Ultimately, these conditions were the outcome of the privatisation and free-market program pursued relentlessly by both National and Labour Party governments since the 1980s.

A 2008 report into mine safety by the Department of Labour described the mining industry as a hazardous workplace, with the potential for catastrophic incidents. The report recommended several changes, including the re-introduction of safety check inspectors. The Clark Labour government did not act on the report, and the incoming Key government shelved it.

The unions have been complicit in this process—a fact underscored by Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) secretary Andrew Little, who told reporters after the explosion that he had "no problem" with safety in the mine. Following the recent revelations, Little, who is also a former president of the Labour Party, claimed the EPMU had "consistently highlighted problems with mining safety regulations and practices in New Zealand." He called

for "immediate action" to improve mine safety in New Zealand.

The EPMU, which had 71 members at Pike River, had in fact been working hand in glove with the company to enforce the conditions in the mine. The union organised no industrial action at the mine over safety, not even when workers walked out to protest the lack of basic emergency equipment, including stretchers and an emergency transport vehicle. EPMU leaders consistently defended the company's safety record. The *Dominion Post* reported on November 26, a week after the tragedy, that any suggestion of safety lapses "did not find traction" with the union. Little declared that the presence of methane in coal mines was a "standard problem"... and West Coast coal mines were "notorious for being gassy."

The royal commission is currently receiving written submissions. Public hearings will commence in July. The presiding judge, Graham Panckhurst, has already declared he would not set out to "lay blame" over the disaster. Instead, under the government's terms of reference, he would simply "find out what happened, why and what must change for the future good."

In other words, the inquiry will cover up who is responsible for the miners' deaths, as well as the political and economic circumstances underpinning the tragedy. Meanwhile, Pike River's receiver, PriceWaterhouseCooper, has advertised internationally to sell the mine, which has coal reserves estimated to be worth close to \$US5 billion.

Mine safety crews re-entered the mine this week for the first time since the explosion, but were only able to proceed 300 metres along the shaft. It could take up to two years to reach the area where the 29 men are believed to have died.



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