

# Inquiry hears damning evidence of unsafe conditions at New Zealand mine

Tom Peters  
8 August 2011

The first phase of the New Zealand government's Royal Commission of Inquiry into last November's disaster at the Pike River Coal (PRC) mine was held last month. During two weeks of hearings at Greymouth Court, expert witnesses described the unsafe conditions at the mine, which led to the deaths of 29 workers in a methane gas explosion. The miners' bodies still have not been recovered. The second phase of the inquiry will be held next month.

The attempts by PRC, the government and the corporate media to present the disaster as a natural event—for which no one is responsible—have been thoroughly discredited.

The submissions to the hearings added to the evidence that the company sacrificed workers' safety in order to extract highly profitable coking coal as quickly as possible. PRC's production was running 18 months behind schedule and the company was under considerable pressure from investors. It proceeded to mine without installing sufficient safety equipment or making a thorough risk assessment.

Dr Jane Newman, a geologist who worked as a consultant for PRC during the mine's development, said the company had failed to adequately investigate the geology of the coal seam. She told the inquiry that she was "not confident that the company was aware" of the risk posed by explosive gas in the area. Newman became so "anxious" that in August 2010 she warned her husband, also a mine consultant, not to enter the Pike River mine.

Harry Bell, a former government inspector who worked as a contractor on the construction of the mine, told the inquiry that PRC had ignored warnings that the mine was unsafe. In early 2008, he told managers that the ventilation system was too "sluggish" to deal with methane gas. He also warned managers that it was "nonsensical madness" for PRC to mine through the highly gassy Hawera fault with a single entry tunnel. A second entry was needed for adequate ventilation. PRC assured him that his concerns would be

addressed, but nothing was done.

In December 2008, after Bell had left the project, he heard from a former workmate that miners were "very upset" about the number of ignitions that had occurred in the tunnel. He called the government's mines inspector and urged him to "stop the work immediately until the ventilation issue had been improved to his satisfaction." The Department of Labour took no action. Bell's nephew, Allan Dixon, was among those who died in the November 19 disaster.

Richard Raymond, a lawyer representing the families of the dead miners, explained that the mine had no suitable second means of egress—a requirement under Department of Labour regulations. He quoted a 2009 audit by the Mines Rescue Service, which stated that the only designated emergency exit, a 110-metre ladder up a ventilation shaft, would have been "virtually impossible" to climb in the event of a fire and "extremely difficult" under normal circumstances. Raymond said a former PRC employee had calculated that the ladder could only take eight men at a time. He also noted that the mine's fresh air base—where workers were instructed to take shelter in the event of an explosion—could hold a maximum of 20 people.

PRC chief executive Peter Whittall did not dispute Raymond's claims. He admitted to the Commission that the ventilation shaft had never been tested in an evacuation drill. In an interview on July 22, Whittall denied claims by former miners and family members of those killed that PRC had taken "shortcuts" because of its precarious financial position. He did not explain why the mine had operated for two years without a proper emergency exit, dismissing the question as "a moot point because the Coroner found the men died instantaneously."

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the disaster, told the media on July 22 that the lack of a second exit was

“most disturbing”. Malcolm Campbell, whose son was one of two Scotsmen killed in the disaster, told the *Courier* on July 16 that miners had been under “mega-pressure” to get the coal out. “It was all about money and I think a few corners may have been cut when it came to safety,” he said.

The National Party government has refused to comment on the evidence. Prime Minister John Key stated on June 21 that the mine would have been illegal in Australia, but stressed that mining standards would not be addressed until the Royal Commission released its final report in March 2012—four months after the next general election.

Workers should have no confidence in this process. The presiding judge has declared that the Commission will not “lay blame” over the disaster, meaning that the inquiry will cover up the responsibility for the miners’ deaths. The government has consistently defended PRC. Last December, Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee told Radio New Zealand that suggestions the company had inadequate safety procedures were “absurd”. Neither National nor the opposition Labour Party—which was in office when the Pike River mine opened in 2008—has explained why the Department of Labour allowed the mine to operate without a suitable emergency exit or adequate ventilation.

Over the past two decades, successive governments have attacked working conditions in the mining industry, effectively allowing companies to self-regulate safety.

Robin Hughes, a former chief inspector of coalmines, told the Commission: “The explosion at the Pike River mine ... had its origins in the repealing of the Coal Mines Act and its regulations in 1993” by a National government. This significantly reduced the role of the Mines Inspectorate, turning it into “a reactive and substantially less qualified organisation ... an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff and not a fence at the top.”

The requirement for mines to have worker-elected safety check inspectors was also abolished. As a result, workers on mine sites have had no independent representative through whom they can raise safety concerns.

In 1999, the Mines Inspectorate’s functions were incorporated into the Department of Labour. The Labour government of Prime Minister Helen Clark that held office from 1999 to 2008 continued National’s policy of “self-regulation”. The number of coal mine inspectors in the country dropped from seven in 1998 to just one by 2011.

In response to public disgust over the revelations about Pike River, Labour and the Green Party have called for stricter mine regulations and for Labour Minister Kate Wilkinson to resign. Their cynical posturing is intended to deflect attention from their own sordid role in the tragedy. Following the explosions, both parties heaped praise on PRC chief executive Whittall, and made rhetorical calls for “national unity” to obscure responsibility for the disaster.

On November 25, for example, Green MP Kevin Hague told parliament: “I will take this public opportunity to convey the Green Party’s thanks, our enormous sympathy, but also our tremendous respect for the integrity, responsibility, and compassion that he [Whittall] has unfailingly shown.”

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had 71 members at Pike River, has called for the mining industry to be reformed. The union’s statements are a cover for its complicity with PRC’s practices. After the first explosion at Pike River last November, the EPMU’s then-national secretary Andrew Little, who is also a former Labour Party president, said the union had “no problem” with safety at the mine. Before the disaster, the union had taken no industrial action at Pike River, even after a group of workers had spontaneously walked off the job to protest over the lack of basic emergency equipment.



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