

New Zealand: Pike River Coal ignored mine safety warnings

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The third phase of the New Zealand government's Royal Commission of Inquiry into the November 2010 Pike River mine disaster ended on February 17 in the Greymouth District Court. More than a year after a series of methane gas explosions ripped through the mine, the bodies of the 29 men who died have not been recovered. The final phase of the inquiry will begin in April and the commission is due to report its findings in September.

Since it began in July 2011, the inquiry has heard from mining experts and former employees of Pike River Coal (PRC) who indicated that the mine was a disaster waiting to happen. The evidence indicates that like other mining companies around the world, PRC sacrificed workers' safety and cut costs to be globally competitive. The production was running 18 months behind schedule and the company was under considerable pressure from investors. It proceeded to mine with faulty equipment, inadequate ventilation, no back-up power generation and no suitable emergency exit.

Last November, the Department of Labour laid 25 charges against PRC, which is currently in liquidation, the company's former chief executive Peter Whittall, and mining contractor VLI Drilling Limited for alleged breaches of health and safety regulations. Whittall has denied the charges and has previously claimed that PRC "had safety at the forefront of its way of operating."

While PRC and Whittall certainly appear to bear responsibility, the government and the official opposition have been complicit. For weeks after the disaster, both the National Party government and

opposition Labour Party tried to portray it as a natural event for which no-one was at fault. All the parliamentary parties, including the Greens, heaped praise on Whittall for his supposed "leadership" following the explosion.

Since the 1990s, successive National and Labour governments have dismantled the Labour Department's Mines Inspectorate and effectively allowed mines to self-regulate their safety. Employee-elected safety check inspectors were removed from mine sites in 1992.

Brett Murray from the Labour Department revealed on February 8 that a notice was sent to PRC, 25 days before the explosion, expressing concern about the stability of the roof after the underground cavity was expanded. Despite receiving multiple warnings about unsafe conditions at Pike River, the Department did not shut down the mine.

Australian mine safety expert David Reece, one of five experts contracted by the Labour Department for its investigation, told the Royal Commission that the deadly explosion was probably caused by a roof collapse deep within the mine, releasing a large concentration of methane gas. The gas could have been ignited by faulty electrical equipment.

Reece told the commission that PRC's tolerance of methane levels "flies in the face of what you should have." He said methane frequently reached explosive levels in the mine, blaming a "serious lack of ventilation" and unreliable and faulty gas detectors. If the mine had been in Australia, he claimed, regulators would have shut it down until the ventilation had been

improved and a second emergency exit put in place.

Tony Reczek, an electrical engineer contracted by the department, criticised the poor quality of Pike River’s electrical systems. Stray currents meant that every mechanical connection could have caused a spark, lighting up the “entire system like a Christmas tree.” Reczek believed that the main ventilation fan could also have ignited the explosion. Pike River was thought to be the only coal mine worldwide with such a fan installed underground, in a gassy environment and difficult to properly maintain. Reczek told the commission that to make the mine safe would have required major changes, which would have been “hugely expensive and inconvenient.”

Several PRC workers and consultants said they expressed concerns about safety well before the disaster but the company ignored them. PRC’s former technical services manager Pieter Van Rooyen revealed last week that his department received an email in April 2010, seven months before the explosion, from a mine shift coordinator who strongly criticised the “inadequate methane drainage system.”

The email called for drilling to be suspended until larger drainage pipes were installed to cope with the volume of gas. The shift coordinator noted that the explosion at West Virginia’s Upper Big Branch mine, which had killed 29 people days earlier, was thought to have been caused by inadequate methane drainage. He urged PRC to put its workers’ safety before profit, writing: “I’m well aware of the pressure we’re under as a company but this should not be the pressure that possibly one day causes us a serious incident.”

Van Rooyen, who left PRC days before the mine exploded, told the commission: “The company focus, as conveyed to me by [former CEOs] Gordon Ward and Peter Whittall, was on the need to produce coal as soon as possible. There was no way that the company would delay coal production.” The decision to begin hydro-mining without building a second emergency exit, in an area with high methane levels, was made for “cashflow purposes,” he said.

Bernie Monk, whose son died in the mine, told Radio

New Zealand that the families of the dead miners were shocked by the latest evidence. “Our jokers never really stood a chance down there,” he said. “We had experienced men supposedly running these mines and we also had departments that had skilled people there and they just let things go by.” He said the families had been calling for a camera to be sent into the mine through a bore hole to help verify the cause of the explosion, but neither the government nor PRC’s receivers have been willing to pay for this.

For its part, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had 65 members at Pike River mine, has postured as a champion of mining safety. Former EPMU national secretary Andrew Little, who is now a Labour Party member of parliament, declared in his maiden speech on February 14: “If ever there is anything that shows what happens after years of a culture of management dominance, deregulation, poor enforcement, bare legal compliance then it is the tragedy at Pike River.”

Yet the company was only able to ignore criticisms of its unsafe practices due to the EPMU’s complicity. The union failed to take any industrial action or criticise the company’s safety record before the explosion—even after a group of workers spontaneously walked off the job to protest the lack of adequate safety gear. Immediately after the explosion, Little defended the company, saying it “had a good health and safety committee that’s been very active,” and claimed that the union was not aware of any health or safety issues at the mine.



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