

A reply to a New Zealand union official

Tom Peters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* article “Drilling company admits safety breaches in mine disaster”, published on August 11, provoked an indignant outburst from Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) Communications Director Neale Jones.

The WSWs reported the admission of VLI Drilling that it failed to ensure its workers’ safety at the Pike River mine in the lead-up to a methane gas explosion in November 2010, which killed 29 men. Pike River Coal and PRC chief executive Peter Whittall also face charges brought by the Labour Department, but their court hearings have been postponed until October. A Royal Commission of Inquiry into the disaster is due to report its findings in September and a police investigation is continuing.

The Royal Commission has accumulated overwhelming evidence that the mine was a catastrophe waiting to happen. The company, which was heavily in debt to its investors, compromised workers’ safety in order to extract coal as fast as possible for export to burgeoning markets in Asia. PRC failed to install adequate methane drainage and ventilation systems, sped up production and operated with no adequate emergency exit.

The EPMU represented about 70 of PRC’s 140 workers. When the WSWs’s exposure of the union’s complicity in the disaster and the still-dangerous working conditions in New Zealand’s mines was shared on the Facebook page “Investigate Pike River Mine Disaster”, Neale Jones responded:

“I have to say, this posting is just complete ignorance typical of the so-called ‘world socialist website’ (sic), which is written by an obscure Marxist group that has an axe to grind against the NZ union movement. The

reality is the EPMU is at the forefront of efforts to bring mine safety up to international best practice, including worker-elected check inspectors. This kind of misinformation doesn’t help anyone.”

Jones did not attempt to answer any of the points made about the EPMU’s record at Pike River. His outburst against the WSWs as an “obscure Marxist group” with an “axe to grind” against NZ unions, is a crude attempt to divert attention from the role of his union. It is precisely because the analysis of the WSWs is intersecting with the considerable hostility and anger among workers towards the betrayals of the unions that Jones has reacted.

In the case of Pike River, the WSWs has documented the relations that prevailed between the NZ government, the company and the EPMU both prior to and following the disaster. Between 2008, when the mine began production, and 2010, PRC’s management and the Department of Labour ignored repeated warnings from workers and mining experts about unsafe conditions at the mine. The company was only able to ignore workers’ concerns due to the assistance of the EPMU.

The EPMU never criticised the company or organised industrial action, despite the blatant safety breaches. After the explosions, one former miner, Brent Forrester, revealed that a group of miners had once walked off the job independently of the union, to protest over the lack of emergency equipment at the mine. Forrester said he had telephoned an EPMU official and informed him of the workers’ safety concerns (see: “Former Pike River Coal miner hits out at lack of mine safety”).

Immediately after the disaster, however, then-EPMU national secretary Andrew Little, who is now a Labour

Party member of parliament, told the *New Zealand Herald* that there was “nothing unusual about Pike River... that we’ve been particularly concerned about.” He told Radio NZ that PRC had taken “great care” going into production and “had a good health and safety committee that’s been very active.”

Only months later, on March 2, 2011, amid mounting evidence of unsafe conditions at the mine, Little stated that “things could have and should have been done a lot differently.” But neither he nor any other EPMU official explained why the union had initially rushed to exonerate PRC, while the company’s CEO was being portrayed as a hero by the entire political establishment and the media.

Jones’s claim that the EPMU is “at the forefront of efforts” to improve mine safety is false. Since the Pike River disaster it has responded to several recent safety breaches at mines across the country by seeking to placate workers with worthless press statements and submissions to the Royal Commission, “calling on” the National Party government and mining companies to allow worker-elected safety check inspectors in mines.

In mines where it has members, the union is continuing to play the role it did at Pike River. After a gas build-up at Solid Energy’s Huntly mine in November 2011, several miners told the media that they feared a Pike River-type explosion. The EPMU dismissed these concerns in a statement that stated it was “confident there are good systems in place for health and safety management” and that Huntly was “not a Pike operation.” In fact, the mine was briefly shut down in June after inspectors discovered potentially lethal levels of methane gas.

The EPMU, New Zealand’s largest private sector union, operates as an adjunct of the corporations and as a defender of the profit system. The union paved the way for the assault on its members in the late 1980s. It embraced the notorious “Nissan Way”, class collaborationist, management methods, and helped impose them throughout the manufacturing industry. Entire sectors such as car assembly were wiped out, leading to tens of thousands of workers either losing their jobs or suffering the destruction of long-standing

conditions, including basic safety.

New Zealand is not an exception. In the US, the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) has worked to protect the profits of mining companies by isolating and betraying strikes for improved wages and conditions. As a result, union membership has collapsed and safety violations are rampant in mines across the US. The explosion at Massey Energy’s Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia, which killed 29 coal miners in 2010 and had much in common with the Pike River disaster, was just one of the tragic results.

The global race to the bottom in safety standards has intensified since the 2008 financial crash. The wave of mine disasters in recent years—including in China, Chile, South Africa, Mexico, the US and New Zealand—demonstrates above all the urgent need for a rebellion against the unions and the establishment of new organisations of workers, based on a unified struggle against the profit system for socialism.



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