

# WSWS speaks to wife of New Zealand mine disaster victim

Tom Peters

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*The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke to Anna Osborne, whose husband Milton died in the November 2010 Pike River Coal mine disaster. Twenty-nine men were killed when a methane gas explosion tore through the mine, located on the remote West Coast of New Zealand's South Island. Almost two years later, the bodies have still not been recovered, despite the National Party government's promises that this would be done.*

*Milton, who was 54, had lived with Anna for 19 years and they had two children. He was working as a contractor in the mine for his own business, Sub Tech Services, laying flumes (pipes used to move coal). The day before the WSWS spoke to Anna, she had attended the September 1 memorial service for one of the miners, Ben Rockhouse, who was just 21.*

*Anna Osborne:* Ben was robbed of another 50 or 60 years of his life. The message from his parents was loud and clear that they are both very angry still about what happened at Pike and they will continue to try to get the remains of their son back. The majority of the Pike families will continue to fight on to get our men home, where they belong, and buried. The company has washed their hands of them really.

*Tom Peters:* Sonya Rockhouse, Ben's mother, made the comment that the miners had died for money.

*AO:* I totally agree with that. My husband was a contractor, so he wasn't promised any large bonuses but the miners were. I think at one stage if they were able to get the production target they would be given an extra \$10,000 as a bonus. Pike's financial status was not very good. The directors were saying, 'Hey, look, we've pumped so much money into Pike, we now want to see a return on that money.' They put the pressure on, saying we need the production. It was definitely production over safety, in the end. They were running out of money so everything that was breaking down or wasn't working, they had no money to replace. But they could offer these great big bonuses if they got the production.

My husband was only there five or six months but for the last two weeks of his life he was working 16, 17 hours a day and we'd hardly see him. When he did come home, I'd wake him up out of the bath because he was absolutely exhausted. He wanted to keep his foot in the door to get a good reputation. He already had a great reputation, but that was my husband—he liked to please people and go that extra mile.

Milton saw that as a real opportunity for us to get a bit of money in the bank because we never really had a lot. We wanted to do a few things around the house that we hadn't been able to afford to do, and maybe one day go on a holiday. We've never really had any money and he died trying to get that money.

*TP:* Were you paid all the money Milton was owed?

*AO:* I went public a few days after the explosion. I was very emotional and I more or less said that he worked his arse off for the company and ultimately it claimed his life, and I would make damn sure that I got what he's owed. So they paid out some of the money that was owed, but we still have money owing and, as unsecured creditors, we're not likely to

see that now.

Milton was our breadwinner. I've got a part-time job as a teacher aide and a school bus driver and I've got two teenage children to look after. So financially, not so much now, but shortly it's going to be quite dire. Donations from New Zealand and around the world are sort of tiding us over at the moment.

*TP:* Did you ever hear about the mine being unsafe before the explosion?

*AO:* No. But I didn't want Milton to be underground. I just had this feeling. I just didn't feel right about him being there. In October 2010 my husband came home early from work and said, 'the mine's been gassed out.' So they had to reventilate the mine before going back. That to me was actually a comfort because I thought at least there were monitors working, and if the methane got too high they'd get the guys out. But after listening to the inquiry [the government's Royal Commission] I learnt that six weeks or so before the explosion the gas monitors weren't working. I sat through each day of the inquiry. I never missed a day, listening to all the flaws and faults.

At our meetings early on, especially when it was still a rescue, not a recovery, [CEO] Peter Whittall said the guys would be down there, in the rescue chambers, with plenty of oxygen, food supplies and water supplies. But then I listened to the inquiry and heard that the rescue chamber was decommissioned, there was no space in the chamber and there was certainly no food or oxygen. Because we were at our most vulnerable, we wanted to hear what Peter Whittall was saying and we hung on every word he said, because he delivered us hope that our men were coming out. We had no indication that that wouldn't be the case, because the Chilean mine disaster was fresh in my mind at the time and they were all rescued. I was thinking miracles do happen.

*TP:* What was your reaction when the families were shown video footage of the explosion?

*AO:* What annoyed me most about the video was that they only showed us a little bit of the explosion. It wasn't until much later on, probably a year after the explosion, that we got to see the full extent of it. Had we seen the full video right from the start, we would have realised there was no way in hell our guys could have survived that explosion. But because we were only shown just a little bit we thought that's nothing too major, it is possible that they could survive.

No families that I know of were actually told directly by the police or Pike River that there'd been an explosion of the mine. I was rung by Peter Haddock, Milton's business partner, to see if Milton was home and he told me there'd been an explosion at Pike. I dropped the phone and became quite hysterical. Milt's best mate and his wife came round and we took off to Pike. We were actually lucky enough to get through the gate. Once we were there, we camped for four nights. I wanted to be there when Milt walked out of the mine.

*TP:* What do you hope will happen through the Royal Commission?

*AO:* It's blatantly obvious that getting rid of the mine inspectors killed

our guys. I still believe that had the Labour Department not gotten rid of them, and we had them regularly checking our mines, my husband would still be alive today. So what we need is the re-introduction of mine inspectors to check all mines. We need someone who's got the guts and the teeth to go in there, check it out and stop them from working—to make sure things are right before people head back down in the mine. I'd also like to see a lead agency take control of rescue operations—the police know absolutely nothing about it. Mines Rescue have been trained to do a job and they know the mine. The fact that police stopped the Mines Rescue team going in, I also believe, killed our guys. We were told that there was no window of opportunity but I still believe there was that window. The best time to re-enter a mine is in the first couple of hours after an explosion. That window of opportunity was lost because the police didn't know what they were doing.

Knowing what I do now, I can't understand why they let Pike operate in the first place, especially knowing that there was no second means of egress. The ventilation shaft was supposedly the second means of egress, but nobody would have been able to get up there, especially if there'd been an explosion underground. Also, there was an underground fan, which doesn't work if there's an explosion. Why the hell was an underground fan put in that mine? There should have been a fan outside the mine. None of the gas monitors were working either.

*TP:* A police investigation is continuing into the disaster. Who should be held responsible?

*AO:* I'd like to see [former CEO] Gordon Ward, who's now in Australia, answer questions. They can't make him come back. I'd like to see the law changed so that people have to come back and answer questions.

I'd like to see Peter Whittall charged because even though he was only CEO for three months he was at Pike from its conception. I'd like to see the Labour Department charged because they failed our guys. Had they done their job properly I wouldn't be talking to you now. They failed miserably. [Also] the directors, as well as some of the managers. [Safety Manager] Neville Rockhouse [father of Ben Rockhouse] has been through enough and paid the ultimate price. He was so snowed under with paperwork and trying to get things changed. And when he went to somebody he was always denied the money to make these changes.

*TP:* After the disaster CEO Peter Whittall was treated like a hero by the media and the political establishment.

*AO:* Some people thought he was the silver lining, but I hope and pray now that people have seen him for what he is. We have never had any apology, nothing like that. They've shown no remorse for what's happened. Paper was shredded and things on computers were deleted. But I'm pleased to hear that the police cloned the computers up at Pike and a lot of evidence has come out of that.

The police won't let anyone know if or who they're going to prosecute until after the Royal Commission report. The Labour Department should be prosecuted, but I can't imagine them prosecuting a government department. It's highly probable that the families will take their own action.

*TP:* Anyone who raised issues with Pike River Coal or the Department of Labour seems to have been ignored.

*AO:* One of the miners who actually did speak out was told, 'You're not in Australia now, if you don't like it, there's the door.' One thing that needs to be addressed is the culture that miners seem to have where they get really complacent. They talk amongst themselves and say, 'Hey things aren't right here,' but no one actually does anything about it. People have got to learn to start speaking out.

*TP:* How has the disaster affected the West Coast?

*AO:* It's brought a lot of people even closer together. But the coast is hurting. There's the recession that we all know about. Pike River employed quite a few people on the coast and there are still contractors

who are owed hundreds of thousands of dollars. Pike put a stop on all contractors' payments after the disaster. A lot of people have gone to the mines in Australia or they are now unemployed. Globally, the coal price has fallen, and with our dollar so high, they can't sell it. Now there are job cuts at [state owned mining company] Solid Energy. The coast has been crippled. We've been punished. I've got friends who are moving overseas because there are no jobs. They can't live here, they can't pay the bills. We're turning into shantytowns, slowly but surely.

*TP:* How do you feel about the Solid Energy job losses and the planned closure of the Spring Creek mine?

*AO:* We need the jobs, but we need the mines to be safe for our people. I'd really like to see Spring Creek keep producing. I've got friends whose husbands work there and they're just wondering where their next dollar's going to come from. They have pay for three more weeks until another announcement is made. They're not sure what to do. We're going to lose all the experienced miners that are here to Australia, and once they're gone they won't come back. The pay's so much better over there.

Solid Energy is a government-owned company but I don't have a lot of faith in [Prime Minister] John Key. To ask the government to step in and help Solid Energy out... I really don't know. I don't think he'll do much at all—I don't believe he's got a heart. He's made lots of promises to the Pike River families that he hasn't kept. He still says, 'there's money there if you can come up with a credible plan' to get the bodies out of the mine. Well, I believe the families have put in a credible plan and it still hasn't been accepted. He just lied.

*TP:* We have been very critical of the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union, particularly because it didn't speak out or take action before the disaster. Immediately after the explosion its then-leader Andrew Little defended Pike River's safety record.

*AO:* This is something that I don't really know much about. We've had a union representative every now and again attend a meeting of the families after the disaster. Some of the families have said, 'What have you done? You've done nothing for us, you should have been our voice.' I can't remember the union's response.

*TP:* Almost two years after the disaster there have been no changes to mine safety legislation.

*AO:* What they're waiting for is the report from the Royal Commission. That's ridiculous. Why wait? Something else might happen between now and then. The report has been put off for another two months, until November. To me it's just crazy. Something has to happen now. There are shortcuts still being taken in the Solid Energy mines. You can't afford to do that. We need better regulations and people that will actually speak up and do something.

*The author also recommends:*

New Zealand: Drilling company admits safety breaches in mine disaster [11 August 2012]



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