

Labour MP blames workers for New Zealand mine disaster

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The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the 2010 Pike River mine disaster in New Zealand released its report on November 5, detailing how Pike River Coal (PRC) sacrificed workers' safety, and ultimately their lives, by speeding up production and failing to install essential safety measures. The commission's limited terms of reference, however, ensured that virtually no one has been held responsible for the explosion, which killed 29 men.

So far, PRC, which is bankrupt, and its CEO Peter Whittall have only been charged with health and safety violations. No former directors have been charged. Nor will anyone in the current National Party government or the previous Labour government be held accountable for decades of cuts to safety "red tape" at the behest of big business, creating the deregulated regime that led to the disaster.

The release of the report has, despite these limitations, partially lifted the lid on some unavoidable truths surrounding the disaster. In response, the government and opposition parties, along with the trade unions, are desperately seeking to wash their hands of any responsibility.

The National government used the report to single out the company and the Department of Labour (DOL). Prime Minister John Key demagogically criticised PRC for putting "its profits and its production ahead of the safety and lives of those 29 workers," while the DOL, he said, had "deluded itself it was doing things properly." The government, Key insisted, carried only "some" responsibility.

In parliament, Labour blamed National for dismantling the mines inspectorate in the 1990s and removing worker-

lected safety inspectors. In reply, National pointed out that the Labour government did not reverse the changes and actually made further cutbacks.

On TV3's "The Nation" on November 10, Damien O'Connor, Labour MP for the West Coast, tried to defend his party's record but only revealed the indifference of the labour bureaucracy as a whole to mine safety. In 2010, O'Connor had said the disaster was "just one of these things that the West Coast unfortunately has had to get used to over the years" and suggested that the company wasn't necessarily to blame.

O'Connor told "The Nation" he now felt "guilty" he had not done more to prevent the tragedy. He admitted that a retired mine manager, Billy Brazil, had warned him in 1994 that the 1992 deregulation would "result in a massive mine disaster because deregulation has done that through the world time and time again." Even after deaths at the ROA and Black Reef mines in 2006, recommendations to improve safety were ignored. Admitting he had not pushed to change the law after Labour won the 1999 election, O'Connor tried to sheet home blame to the DOL, saying it had "supported deregulation."

O'Connor also sought to cover up the role played by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) in suppressing opposition to deteriorating mine safety. Asked whether Labour had received any advice from the EPMU to change the law, O'Connor avoided answering directly. He defended the EPMU, saying "the coal miners themselves... weren't demanding of their own union that things should change." He declared that "the whole community, when it knew that things weren't quite right at Pike River, should have been more forceful." In other words, according to O'Connor, the miners and wider

working class were to blame.

A similar line is being peddled by various media pundits. In separate pieces in the *Dominion Post*, columnists Sean Plunket and Dave Armstrong made token criticisms of Labour and National, but concluded that the workers were to blame for “allowing” and “tolerating” the deregulation of safety standards.

The purpose of blaming workers is to divert attention from Labour and National’s pro-business policies, enforced by the union bureaucracy, which allowed companies to put profit ahead of safety. In fact, working people never voted for, or endorsed, any of these policies. They were enacted, often without warning, by unpopular governments that were eventually tossed out by an increasingly embittered and disillusioned electorate.

In a November 9 column, “left” media commentator Chris Trotter, an inveterate apologist for the Labour Party, admitted that “if there’s ‘blood on the coal’” at Pike River, “Labour helped to put it there.” During the 1980s, the Labour government of David Lange, he wrote, adopted the theory that the “free market” was “genuinely capable of regulating itself.” Then for “nine long years” under Prime Minister Helen Clark, Labour did nothing to prevent such tragedies. But Trotter ended his column expressing the hope that after three decades of abject subservience to big business and “still enthralled with neoliberalism and deregulation,” Labour could yet have a “change of heart.”

Like most others, Trotter remained silent on the part played by the EPMU, which had some 70 members at Pike River. The Royal Commission’s report noted: “In the last 48 days before the explosion there were 21 reports [from workers] of methane levels reaching explosive volumes, and 27 reports of lesser, but potentially dangerous, volumes.” Despite such warnings, including an earlier instance when miners spontaneously walked off the job to protest the lack of emergency equipment, the EPMU never organised any industrial action.

In 2010, the Labour Party and the union joined the government in defending the company. Then-EPMU leader Andrew Little, who was also Labour Party president and is now an MP, told Radio NZ that that PRC had taken “great care” going into production and “had a good health and safety committee that’s been very

active.” These claims have been completely discredited.

The pseudo-left groups, the Workers Party (WP), Socialist Aotearoa and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), have also covered up the EPMU’s responsibility. The WP and ISO blamed the disaster on the “weakness” of the unions and called for them to be “rebuilt.” In his “Against the Current” blog, Steven Cowan criticised the EPMU from the standpoint that “modern” unionism “failed the miners.” In another entry, Cowan called for “pressure” to be applied to the bureaucracy to change course and return to “good old fashioned [militant] trade unionism.”

This is a bankrupt perspective. Proper safety measures were not lacking at the Pike River mine because the EPMU was “weak” or not militant enough. The union’s perspective was to ensure the company’s profitability and competitiveness. It functioned as an enforcer for the company and the government of the deregulated safety regime that led to the disaster.

The EPMU is not the exception but the rule. Unions in New Zealand and internationally have been transformed over the past three decades into industrial policemen for big business. This process has only accelerated since the 2008 global financial crash. Workers in every country and every industry are being told they must sacrifice jobs, wages and conditions, including safety standards, for the sake of the “national economy” and global “competitiveness.”

The unsafe conditions at the Pike River mine, which was developed to supply coal to the burgeoning steel industry in China and Asia, were an outcome of this process.



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